

## **THE LITERACY CORPS IN PAHLAVI IRAN (1963-1979) POLITICAL, SOCIAL AND LITERARY IMPLICATIONS**

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The subject of this paper is the Literacy Corps (*sepah-e danesh*).<sup>1</sup> Its framework is the so-called White Revolution (*enqelab-e sefid*) which took place in Iran in the period 1963 to 1979 during the reign of the late Muhammad Reza Pahlavi (1941-1979) and which in the 1970s was called the "Revolution of the Shah and the People" (*enqelab-e shah va mardom*). The White Revolution is mentioned in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran as a step intended to reinforce the political, cultural, and economic dependence of Iran on world imperialism and as the event which brought into being a united movement of the people and a momentous revolution of the Muslim nation.

Suggested by the Kennedy administration as an alternative to 'red' revolutions, as a way to combat communist subversion and as a condition to U.S. aid, the White Revolution aimed at propelling Iran onto the level of the most modernized countries before the end of the century. The land reform was its cornerstone and the sixth point concerned the creation of the Literacy Corps. Further points were later added: point twelve regarded the reform of the educational system and point fifteen dealt with free schooling at all levels<sup>2</sup>.

According to the Literacy Corps programme, 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

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<sup>1</sup> The present article is taken from my Ph. Dissertation at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London which will be published in Switzerland. The book will also include an analysis of tribal education (the so-called "White Tent program") and the Religious Corps (1971-1979).

<sup>2</sup> I. Ayman called these measures *the educational revolution* in his volume on *Educational innovation in Iran*, Paris, 1974, p. 2.

service and – amongst other duties – taught children between the ages of six and twelve years who had not yet attended school up to the second grade. What normally happened before the establishment of the Literacy Corps was that elementary school teachers were required to have completed their first cycle of the secondary school up to the ninth grade and two years of normal school training, but the lack of teachers led the authorities to hire even those who did not hold a secondary-school diploma.

At the beginning of the 1960s, the basic reasoning of the Iranian government was that the majority of the population was illiterate and that illiterate workers could not foster productivity and therefore retarded development<sup>3</sup>. The Literacy Corps was considered the cheapest way to improve literacy and an effective means of enlisting the urban youth to work in villages. The costs of the Literacy Corps were borne by the Plan Organization and the Ministry of Education; the armed forces were required to provide funding and personnel, and the expenses of school building were covered by the villages.

Supported by archive material and interviews with thirteen corpsmen and six corpswomen – obviously a narrow sample compared to the almost 200 000 young men and women involved in the Literacy Corps – this paper will argue that this programme had an impact not only on the literacy rate of the population living in rural areas (they taught over 2.2 million boys and girls plus another million of adults), but also on the perception of the regime by the corpsmen<sup>4</sup>.

My argument is that some members of the Literacy Corps were politicized against the regime and, as a result of their experience, took part in the Revolution of 1979. Thus, through the Literacy Corps Muhammad Reza Shah inadvertently helped the formation and the spread of political ideas which turned against the regime and eventually resulted in the Revolution. The revolutionaries' takeover owed part of its appeal to the failure of the modernization process, which was implemented from above and at a speed which – for parts of the country still living in underdeveloped conditions – was not combined with other necessary measures.

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<sup>3</sup> A. Asrari, *The impact of educational development on the economic progress of modern Iran*, Education Doctorate, Univ. of Northern Colorado, 1973, p. 84.

<sup>4</sup> *Iran Almanac and Book of Facts 1976*, Tehran, 1976, p. 330.

*The Idea of the Literacy Corps*

Iran's conscription law dating back to 1925 required two-year military service for all men between 21 and 45 inclusive. However, in time of peace only men between 21 and 25 were actually drafted and even then men eligible for military service were not called due to local quotas filled by lottery. In addition, bribes were often paid in order to avoid conscription, whilst in tribal areas men simply failed to report despite severe penalties provided by the law<sup>5</sup>.

The Literacy Corps was set up by two government decrees issued on 26 October and on 3 December 1962 and approved by the *Majles* on 26 January 1963. In the first decree provisions were made so that if there were more volunteers than needed, the selection was by lottery. In the supplementary bill various matters were considered: wages were to be the same as those received by conscripts with high school diploma, during the training period expenses were to be paid by the Ministry of War and then by the Ministry of Education, discipline was subject to the army rules but the execution of the corpsmen's educational duties fell under the regulations of the Ministry of Education.

In many cases, after completion of their service, they continued to teach in the villages as civilians. Preference was given to them when applying for jobs in the civil service<sup>6</sup>. Among those who joined the Literacy Corps were the university rejectees, among whom 9,000 out of 28,000 were drafted into various army corps<sup>7</sup>.

In September 1965 the first World Congress on the Eradication of Illiteracy was convened in Tehran under the auspices of UNESCO. On this occasion the Ministers of Education of many countries learned about the Literacy Corps and according to the Shah: "In 1962 the money spent on arms throughout the world reached 120 billion dollars. According to the estimate of the experts, only 1/30 of this money is enough to educate the world's 700 million illiterate people"<sup>8</sup>. Iran gave the

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<sup>5</sup> Telegram, 30 October 1966, *Compulsory Military Service in Iran*, NARA (National Archives, College Park, Maryland) DEF 9-4 Iran.

<sup>6</sup> R.M. Savory, "Social Development in Iran during the Pahlavi Era" in G. Lenczowski (ed.), *Iran under the Pahlavis*, Stanford, 1978, p. 111.

<sup>7</sup> Statistics from *Kayhan International*, 11 July 1968.

<sup>8</sup> National Committee for World Literacy Programme, *The continuous efforts of Iran in the international literacy campaign*, Tehran, 1972, p. 7.

equivalent of \$700,000 of its military budget to UNESCO in order to help the world campaign against illiteracy. That amount was later allocated – and thus returned – by UNESCO to Iran in order to increase literacy<sup>9</sup>.

The democratization of education was a *conditio sine qua non* for the realization of a politically democratic society<sup>10</sup>. However, as shown by students and teachers' demonstrations in Iran, not every social change and every political act started by educational policies might be the ones expected and appreciated by the regime.

Regarding the origins of the Literacy Corps, two of the persons I interviewed gave credit to Dr Parviz Natel Khanlari, the minister of education who on 14 October 1962 first announced, in the presence of the shah, the decision to establish this corps<sup>11</sup>. And in fact, Khanlari claimed to be the one who had the idea and, at the same time, admitted some conflict in this regard with Shojaeddin Shafa, who later created the Campaign Against Illiteracy (*Mohasseseh peykar ba bisavadi*)<sup>12</sup>. Another interviewee referred to Dr Amir Birjandi, the deputy minister of education who was in charge of the implementation of the Literacy Corps project and who had already helped independent social workers such as Ms Najmeh Najafi since the mid-fifties<sup>13</sup>.

As far as I could understand, the originator of the conception of the Literacy Corps is not clear, but I doubt it was only the Shah's idea to find useful purposes for the army. The same doubt was raised by an American source: "Of course the Literacy Corps is not the Shah's idea at all, but rather that of the Minister of Education who, once he assumed office, devised it as a substitute for the already operative elementary education program of his predecessor"<sup>14</sup>.

In the meanwhile, the Iranian army envisaged the possibility of using the Literacy Corps as a "potential intelligence net covering the entire country" and suggestions were made that corpsmen were possibly given rudimentary intelligence training before going to rural areas. However, according to the American Embassy in Tehran "any attempt to formalize the corpsmen's intelligence role could have severe repercussions". First, villagers would have reacted badly to such a possibility and would have negated their confidence in these young men and in the regime itself.

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<sup>9</sup> Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *The White Revolution*, Tehran, 1967, p. 125.

<sup>10</sup> S. Rassekh, *Inégalités en matière d'éducation et d'emploi en Iran*, Paris, 1978, p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> Interviews with Ali Muhammad Honar, Tehran, 18 May 1997, and Mehranghiz Dolatshahi, Paris, 5 April 1998.

<sup>12</sup> "Dr Parviz Khanlari", in *Ayandeh*, vol. 16, 1990, n. 5-8, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> Interviews with Gholamreza Sadrai, Tehran, 11 and 20 May 1997; N. Najafi and H. Hinckley, *Reveille for a Persian Village*, London, 1960, p. 11.

<sup>14</sup> Airgram, 8 December 1962, n. A-356, *The Literacy Corps*, NARA, RG59 General Records of the Dept of State, Central Decimal File, 888.43/12-862.

Secondly, corpsmen were young and thus resented more than anyone else the restrictions of society. Their idealistic enthusiasm – based on the trust and respect entrusted by villagers – was a key factor of success and could thus be destroyed by an order to act as extensions of SAVAK or of the military intelligence<sup>15</sup>.

When Dr Birjandi was informed of the possibility to join high school education and military discipline, “he was appalled by the prospect of roughnecks from the Cossack Brigade trying to teach each others what they barely knew themselves”. Although not always adequately utilized, in some advanced as well as developing countries the armed forces had already been used as an important tool for modernizing life in rural areas. Previous experience showed that military teachers are equal or even better teachers than civilians<sup>16</sup>. The use of ex-officers and enlisted personnel for productive purposes was thus suggested, amongst the others, by the International Labour Organization (ILO) in the “Recommendation No. 71 Concerning Employment Organization in the Transition from War to Peace”<sup>17</sup>.

Spreading a sense of national consciousness, humanizing the military and bringing soldiers in close contact with the government and with peasants were the consequences envisaged in the use of the army for civil purposes. However, a clash of principle was brought about: the use of conscripts for civil purposes had been condemned by the 1930 ILO Convention on Forced Labour mainly on the basis that the army could provide cheap labour in competition with civilian workers, and thus slacken the development of a purely civilian ability to implement the same skills. On the occasion of the 1962 conference, ILO explained that the 1930 Convention had come into existence as a consequence of the colonial practices in overseas territories where local conscription was used to build roads and bridges at the lowest possible cost. Therefore, the main question was “whether it was better for an army to remain an unqualified burden on the country’s economy or whether it should contribute to the country’s development”<sup>18</sup>.

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<sup>15</sup> 25 February 1965, n. A-452, *The Literacy Corps - An Apparent Success*, NARA SOC 6-5 Iran.

<sup>16</sup> H. Hanning, *The Peaceful Uses of Military Forces*, New York, 1967, p. 115.

<sup>17</sup> Hanning, 1967, p. xix.

<sup>18</sup> Hanning, 1967, p. 11, 18-20.

*Reasons, motivations and aims of the Literacy Corps*

By 1962, a year before the implementation of the Literacy Corps, the primary enrollment ratio (number of enrolled students/number in age cohort) in the major towns reached 79%, while in rural areas the comparable statistics was 24%. Urban school enrollment grew faster than rural enrollment and this trend showed that inequality in the school system was going to persist, mainly because few teachers were prepared to work and live in rural areas<sup>19</sup>.

Considering Iran's expanding population, Khanlari was reported as having said that the Literacy Corps was the perfect device to attack illiteracy at the primary school level for the following reasons: it was designed to absorb high school graduates who could be drafted in the army and who had no skills to be employed; it made good use of the expertise and experience of the army in literacy training techniques and of military facilities at which the recruits were to be taught; it saved funds compared with the previous teachers training programme; and, finally, because the concept of the Literacy Corps was peculiarly suited to the Persian temperament. In other words, 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"<sup>20</sup>.

*Reasons* – The factors which led to the creation of the Literacy Corps were the need for literate manpower, the low cost of this programme, the need for teachers available to move to rural areas, the army's inability to absorb so many young men, the high unemployment rate among graduates, the need to spread a common identity among Iranians, and the will to educate the female population.

Illiteracy was one of the main problems facing Iran and its industrial development. According to the *Manpower Survey* carried out in Iranian factories in 1958, 41% of the workers could neither read nor write. Illiteracy severely limited the amount of training in the industrial sector. It also caused acute unemployment in towns and large-scale movements from agriculture in order to foster industrial development. Social development went so fast that a foreign observer wondered if the revolution would continue to be called *white* and noted that, upon finishing their degrees, young educated Iranians found no employment because they qualified in fields with few opportunities<sup>21</sup>. He also noticed

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<sup>19</sup> J.W. Ryan, *Educational resources and scholastic outcomes: a study of rural primary schooling in Iran*, Ph.D, Stanford Univ., 1973, p. 130.

<sup>20</sup> 8 December 1962, n. A-356, *The Literacy Corps*, NARA.

<sup>21</sup> PRO (Public Record Office, London) FO 371 170425 year 1963, EP 2181/1 and EP 2181/3, 13 June 1963.

that the more young Iranians studied, the more class conscious they became<sup>22</sup>.

In economic terms, the failure of normal recruitment channels to meet rural needs or to do so at an acceptable cost led to the establishment of this programme, with which “the state combined the stick of conscription with the carrot of monetary advantage and opportunity for service”<sup>23</sup>. In fact, the corpsmen were paid approximately \$16 by the army during the training period<sup>24</sup>. Afterwards, they were paid between 300 and 400 toman a month (about \$50), according to the military rank they were awarded at the conclusion of their training, ranging from third to first sergeant. Women were paid 450 toman a month and, though wearing a uniform, did not fit in any military category. In addition, the cost of educating a student in a school run by the Literacy Corps was considered minimal (100 toman, that is \$13.33), whilst in a conventional school the cost was three times as much. Besides, the construction of facilities was paid for by the villagers<sup>25</sup>.

The spreading of a common identity among Iranians belonging to different ethnic groups and backgrounds was also among the reasons that triggered the Literacy Corps programme. It could well be argued that nothing could be a better testimonial to the Pahlavi regime than the young educated middle class. Who could possibly make a better impression on the villagers than these young people sent to help and raise their living standards?

Having realized that the country could not progress without involving the female population, in 1968 Muhammad Reza Pahlavi promoted the formation of the Women’s Literacy Corps, who did not wear the veil but a rather European military skirt. The recruitment of young urban women was also seen by the government as a major contribution towards secularization, but the mullahs’ fierce reaction to this initiative pushed the shah to present the programme as a project of the women’s organization led by his sister Ashraf<sup>26</sup>. In fact, Khomeini himself opposed the Women’s Literacy Corps<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> PRO FO 371 170425 year 1963, document EP 2181/4, 3 October 1963.

<sup>23</sup> Ryan, 1973, p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> Airgram, 13 January 1963, n. A-46, *Initial Implementation of Literacy Corps Proposal in Azerbaijan*, NARA, 888.43/1-1363.

<sup>25</sup> Pahlavi, 1967, p. 111. Sanghvi, R., C. German, D. Missen, “The Literacy Corps”, in *The Revolution of the Shah and the People*, vol. 7, London, 1967, p. 23.

<sup>26</sup> D. Menashri, *Education and the Making of Modern Iran*, London, 1992, p. 179. For the Women Literacy Corps see my article “Gender and the Army of Knowledge in Pahlavi Iran 1969-1978”, in V. Martin and S. Ansari (eds.), *Religion and Culture in Iran*, Reading, 2001.

<sup>27</sup> Speech of 1970 collected in *Khomeini va Jonbesh-e Esteqlal*, an unpublished collection of his speeches clandestinely diffused in Iran in 1973.

*Motivations* – The initial motivations ranged from choosing an easier life compared to joining the army, to direct access to the teaching profession, being university entrance failures, not having the financial resources for further education, or perhaps pacifism. However, in many cases the corpsmen had no impulse to join the corps, were drafted and succeeded in escaping their duties. Mehdi Taghdiri, for instance, taught Saturday to Thursday and every 20 days used to take a week off without permission<sup>28</sup>. Karamali Azardar worked six days a week and once asked to go home, where he stayed for a whole month; on another occasion he went to see his family for a month without applying for a permit; since there was no road, during winter he did not leave the village for six months and therefore did not receive his wages<sup>29</sup>. Ali Sadeghian used to take two days off every two weeks and travel four hours by car in order to see his family; he admitted that during the summer he was spending more time at home because his students were busy in the fields<sup>30</sup>.

Pacifism might also have been one of the motivations among some religious minorities such as the Bahais. In this connection, in 1965 Birjandi was reported to have drafted religious minorities into the Literacy Corps and to have sent a group – including Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenian Christians and Bahais – to work in the area around Yazd. The villagers' reactions were quite different: on the one hand, he received a complaint regarding the work of one Bahai, but on the other hand after six months Birjandi started receiving letters from villages asking to keep the corpsmen as long-term teachers. However, the religious centres of Qum and Ray presented some difficulties due to a rumour spread by Khomeini that almost all corpsmen were Bahais and were thus going to “ruin the children they taught”. As a consequence, the Ministry of Education sent to those areas only corpsmen originally from there and, when possible, mullahs' sons. Indeed, the opposition was disarmed and also the number of girls attending slowly grew. At the same time, Khomeini had given a piece of land in his native town of Khomein in order to build a school, but took it back when he guessed it could have been used by the Literacy Corps. One cannot fail to observe that the land was redonated within a short span of time when the Ministry appointed as local corpsman one of Khomeini's relatives<sup>31</sup>.

*Aims* - According to Birjandi “since education raises people's expectations, in order not to result in social and political chaos the

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<sup>28</sup> Interview, Tehran, 7 May 1997.

<sup>29</sup> Interview, Tehran, 18 May 1997.

<sup>30</sup> Interview, Tehran, 13 May 1997.

<sup>31</sup> 25 February 1965, n. A-452, *The Literacy Corps*, NARA.

literacy corpsman is a *multi-purpose village-level worker* who should act on different levels within a *planned change*<sup>32</sup>. In the sources, aims are thus divided into educational, economic, social and political<sup>33</sup>.

Educational aims involved the teaching of children between the ages of 6 and 12 years who had not previously attended school, the teaching of adults in evening classes, the funding of local libraries, the organization of rural Boy Scout groups and other recreational and youth associations, the teaching of games, the supervising of physical education and the running of theatre groups as a way of providing healthy entertainment. Economic aims involved the improvement of health and sanitation, the introduction of better agricultural methods within the land reform, the development of construction projects, and the postal service<sup>34</sup>.

According to an issue of the *Literacy Corps Magazine*, the main social aim was bringing about “a social revolution at rural levels”<sup>35</sup>. Helping the transition from an archaic system to a market economy, filling the gap left by the landlords and therefore creating a new link between villagers and government, promoting participation and educating women into a role besides that of motherhood were the other social aims of the Literacy Corps. They were also supposed “to provide villagers with a social and political education and awaken their sense of social and economic responsibility”<sup>36</sup>.

Regarding the political aims of the Literacy Corps, this programme was supposed to help the regime’s attempt to establish a “modern” nation-state on a basis different from religion. The Pahlavis imposed the Persian language, and taught the history of the Persian empire and of its achievements and contributions to the world civilization as a means to make people feel part of Iran<sup>37</sup>. The history textbook for the third year of high school considered the interference of the Zoroastrian clergy in politics as a major reason for the defeat of the Sasanian Empire by the Muslim armies. The message was that religious interference in political affairs was extremely dangerous. However, during the revolution of 1979, the slogans used by university and high-school graduates showed attitudes antithetical to those wished for by the Pahlavi regime<sup>38</sup>.

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<sup>32</sup> A. Birjandi, *The Education Corps Project in Iran: A Work Plan for Rural Development*, Tehran, 1965, p. 15.

<sup>33</sup> M. Bani Hashem, *Enqelab-e sefid-e Shahinshah*, Tehran, 1343 (1964-1965), pp. 24-26.

<sup>34</sup> Ministry of Education, *100 000 Literacy Corps*, Tehran, n.d. (1974?), p. 12, 22.

<sup>35</sup> Ministry of Education, *Literacy Corps Magazine*, Tehran, 1970, pp. 12-13.

<sup>36</sup> Ministry of Education, *100 000 Literacy Corps*, p. 16.

<sup>37</sup> H. E. Chehabi, “Ardabil becomes a Province: Center-periphery Relations in Iran”, in *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 29, 1997, p. 248.

<sup>38</sup> S. Siavoshi, 1995, “Regime Legitimacy and High-school Textbooks”, in S. Rahnema and S. Behdad (eds.), *Iran after the Revolution. Crisis of an Islamic State*, London, 1995, pp. 102, 214.

Persian as a common language was the major tool used to inculcate the spirit of national unity among the people of the isolated villages and the tribes who spoke different dialects and had different customs<sup>39</sup>. In fact, whilst in exile, the Shah wrote: "I viewed central control of public education as one means of ensuring national unity. Iran is a mosaic of many tribes and nationalities with different cultures and traditions. Teaching the Persian language throughout our country fostered a common bond among all"<sup>40</sup>.

In this regard, the Literacy Corps was viewed as "a national unifying force teaching Persian as the official language and, by example, promulgating the customs of hygiene and social behaviour"<sup>41</sup>. For the first time in Iranian history, the government showed an active interest in the peasants' welfare. In order to strengthen the villagers' sense of nationalism and patriotism, corpsmen were sent with the political aim of spreading the idea of national identity.

Even if the impact on literacy might have been limited, the programme spread the idea of national identity and influenced the villagers self-perception as Iranians<sup>42</sup>. Therefore, the Literacy Corps contributed to the passage from an identity in terms of family and tribal links towards a national identity. This passage also implied the rise of a political identity<sup>43</sup>.

Linked to the spreading of national identity is the development of political democracy, seen as a necessary step towards a democratic economy, which was considered a *conditio sine qua non* for social democracy. According to an official document, the virtuous circle was supposed to start with the village councils through democratic organizations such as "rural cooperatives, agricultural corporations, equity courts". In the governors' minds, the democratic process would be pushed further by "village cultural centres, equipped with television sets, radios, and libraries, with visiting lecturers to explain Iran's civilization and culture" to the villagers<sup>44</sup>.

In conclusion, the Literacy Corps programme was supposed to bring about several changes in the Iranian rural society and such a transformation was helped by migration from rural to urban areas, a

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<sup>39</sup> L.T. Khoi (UNESCO), *Iran. Perspectives de l'éducation (1973-1988)*, Tehran, 1972, p. 5.

<sup>40</sup> M.R. Pahlavi, *Answer to History*, New York, 1980, p. 128.

<sup>41</sup> L.M. Brammer, "Iran's Educational Revolution - Military Style", in *Comparative Education Review*, vol. 10, October 1966, p. 496.

<sup>42</sup> Joseph S. Szyliowicz, *Education and Modernization in the Middle East*, London, 1973, p. 418.

<sup>43</sup> Chehabi, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-253.

<sup>44</sup> The Imperial Government of Iran, *Address of the Shahinshah Aryamehr and reports by the Prime Minister and the Plan Organization managing director at the historic session at Plan Organization on 29 December 1970*, Tehran, 1970, p. 38.

### *The Literacy Corps in Pahlavi Iran*

major trend in the 1960s and 1970s. But, how could rural society cope with so many changes in such a short time? And would these changes “bring the good life soon enough to avert the inevitable violent social upheavals which accompany awareness of exploitation, cumulative centuries of frustration and bondage, and convulsive desires for immediate social change”? Or would the urban corpsmen become social “dynamite” among villagers awakened by the transistor radio<sup>45</sup>?

### *The implementation of the programme*

The Literacy Corps programme was responsible for a total of 166,949 corpsmen and 33,642 corpswomen in the period 1963 to the end of 1977<sup>46</sup>. The main problem facing the organization was finding the money (nearly two billion rials assuming an annual strength of 10,000) to pay for the corpsmen’s services. In this connection, the Plan Organization could supply “manpower development funds”, the army could provide some sort of assistance and other ministries could contribute in a different way. Having been granted additional 671 million rials above the higher than usual annual appropriation for the fiscal year 1341 (1962-1963) of 7,362 billion rials, the Ministry of Education was considered in a position to absorb a substantial part of the cost<sup>47</sup>.

A further problem came into existence when, after having completed their service, corpsmen were hired by the Ministry of Education and their salaries increased to a minimum of 500 tomans a month<sup>48</sup>. Though corruption did not seem to touch the corps and enthusiasm was reported to be a key factor of success, major problems did occur in terms of deficient planning, administrative inefficiency and lack of cooperation. A few examples will show the situation: transportation for corpsmen and supervisors was scarce, paper and pencils were not budgeted and a profit was made by selling these items to the villagers; some areas were saturated with corpsmen; cooperation with other revolutionary corps did not come easily, especially because they were all competing for manpower and funds to such an extent that in 1965 all eligible high school graduates were required by the three corps.

In 1966 some corpsmen were involved in political activity within the Islamic Nations Party. Arrested in the autumn of 1965, fifty-five

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<sup>45</sup> Brammer, 1966, p. 495.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with Gholamreza Sadrai, Tehran, 27 May 1997. Same data in Menashri, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>47</sup> 8 December 1962, n. A-356, *The Literacy Corps*, NARA. An annual strength of 10 000 corpsmen was foreseen in “3,000 sepahi baghiyeh az safheh!” in *Kayhan*, 28 Dey 1343 (18 January 1964).

<sup>48</sup> 25 February 1965, n. A-452, *The Literacy Corps*, NARA.

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 of Iran, 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; and the problem, though undoubtedly a tricky one for those involved with security, does not seem particularly significant at this time”<sup>49</sup>.

In conclusion, the organization of the Literacy Corps programme presented some problems. Responsibility was confusingly shared by the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Defense, both accepted the project but the lines of budgeting were fuzzy. Funds allocated to the Literacy Corps programme from the Ministry of Education were taken away from other projects and, consequently, little money was left for hiring ordinary teachers, leading therefore to their shortage. For the same reason, the Teachers’ Training College was closed in 1963, obliging the youth willing to teach to volunteer for the Literacy Corps. Last but not least, no link was planned between literacy provided by corpsmen and other educational programmes. In other words, nothing was offered beyond the basic education offered by the Literacy Corps<sup>50</sup>.

#### *The training programme*

In 1962 the training programme lasted only four months and the work in the village fourteen months, that is the equivalent of two annual programmes. However, the training and the period of service did not coincide with the school periods of the ordinary system, thus raising problems for those willing to pursue further education within the regular school system. As a consequence, the period of training was soon extended to six months and the service in rural areas to eighteen months. The training programme took place in barracks located in twenty-one centres. At the beginning, the sixteen weeks of training were divided between military – which kept the corpsmen busy for one-third of the training period – and non-military subjects<sup>51</sup>.

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<sup>49</sup> 10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps - Growing Maturity*, NARA SOC 6-5 Iran.

<sup>50</sup> 14 November 1963, n. A-284, *Current Position of Literacy Corps*, NARA EDU 9-1 Iran.

<sup>51</sup> Birjandi, 1966, p. 25.

*Life in the villages*

Having completed their training programme, 2 500 corpsmen of the first cohort marched in the streets of Tehran wearing their uniform and the Literacy Corps' symbol on their chest<sup>52</sup>. Eventually, corpsmen were ready to be sent to the villages which requested their intervention and could provide the necessary school building. The Literacy Corps project was soon acknowledged by the international press as "immensely successful". Foreign journalists drove tens of miles away from Tehran, looked at a literacy corpsman and "his class of some 40 or 50 seven to twelve year olds packed tight in one room and gaping at the visitors in the courtyard". Though the international press recognized that one visit to a village on the outskirts of Tehran could not be enough to judge the Literacy Corps' success, they were impressed by the fact that corpsmen looked "seriously absorbed in their duties"<sup>53</sup>.

The implementation of an educational programme in rural areas was inevitably linked to the changes brought in by the land reform. According to a report on a visit to Khorasan and Fars written in the fall of 1965 by British diplomats, the teams in charge of the implementation of the second stage of the land reform – that is, they were drawing up tenancy agreements – included a number of literacy corpsmen who seemed "competent and fair". However, there were not "enough officials to do the work required or to set up the co-operatives". Poverty was reportedly still very widespread, mainly as a result of the lack of water which could menace the land reform itself. The land reform was not seen as a major change for the landless peasants or the agricultural labourer, unless it could improve living conditions and decrease oppression by providing alternative sources of employment. Despite all this, "a movement had begun in the countryside", as shown by "the ability of the rural population to adapt itself to change and accept responsibility", by "the new sense of purpose, independence and self-reliance of the peasants and the emergence of leaders in the co-operatives", by the general request for education and by school attendance in the ordinary schools ran by the Ministry of Education, in those managed by the Literacy Corps<sup>54</sup>.

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<sup>52</sup> "Sepah-e danesh dar khiabanha-ye Tehran rejeh miravad" in *Ettela'at*, 19 Farvardin 1342 (8/4/1963).

<sup>53</sup> PRO FO 371 186722 document EP1452/1, 17 June 1966.

<sup>54</sup> PRO FO 371 186723 document EP1461/1.

In rural areas pace was linked to seasons and school attendance was strictly connected to the need of manpower in the fields and in pastures. Seasonal absence of students was explained in *Peyk-e mo'alleh*, a magazine published in order to help corpsmen: "One of the problems that the literacy corpsmen of the first to the third cohort had to solve was that of the season. In other words, half way in the month of *Ordibehesht* (April-May) the agricultural seasons takes place. The literacy corpsman who enters a village in this period soon realizes that everyone – children and elders included – are busy working from dawn to sunset. And afterwards they are exhausted, go to bed and do not attend classes. In this period the class is attended only by a few pupils aged 7 to 8. In the villages inhabited by not too fanatic people, rural girls go to school until they are 12 years old. This situation will take place till the middle of the month of *Mehr* (September-October). Afterwards, the need for agricultural purposes will decrease and a new period will start when almost everyone will be available to attend school. The number of students will thus increase threefold or fourfold. This is a problem, since it is not possible to mix students attending since the beginning which new ones". As a solution, it was suggested to work "in three different stages: the pupils of the first class will attend in the morning, those aged between 8 to 14-year will be taught in the afternoon and the others in the evening. The timetable will be decided by the teacher. These methods will be modified according to the need"<sup>55</sup>.

Hunger, diseases and government officers were what people feared most. Villagers generally had no idea of sanitation and hygiene. Though in such a situation literacy was often considered superfluous, if one man could read, that was "enough to keep the entire village informed" and people soon began discussing foreign and domestic politics. Corpsmen replaced ponds with bathhouses which were then also used for preparing the bride and the groom for the wedding ceremony. In addition, since the washing of the dead was often done in the stream from which the villagers fetched water, literacy corpsmen had to build mortuaries in order to keep the stream clean and avoid contamination<sup>56</sup>. In this connection, Ali Sadeghian reportedly built a mortuary in the village, next to the mosque, in order to avoid being washed in channels and streams surrounding Darregarm, a village near Borujerd in Luristan<sup>57</sup>.

Corpsmen aimed at 'fighting illiteracy'. Such a military terminology typically characterized the Iranian White Revolution – 'fighting' illiteracy, 'Crusade' against illiteracy, 'Army' of Knowledge – and was a linguistic metaphor used for similar purposes in Nicaragua, where

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<sup>55</sup> Ministry of Education, *Peyk-e mo'alleh*, Tehran, 1964, p. 2.

<sup>56</sup> Najafi and Hinckley, 1960, pp. 120, 71.

<sup>57</sup> Interview, Tehran, 13 May 1997.

teachers even raised a banner in a newly literate area, declaring it a 'liberated territory'<sup>58</sup>.

Whenever possible, Iranian corpsmen were sent to their own districts so that they could be familiar with the language and the customs, providing a common base between the villagers and the corpsman and thus a confidence which otherwise would have taken some time to build<sup>59</sup>. However, experience showed that corpsmen sent near their home towns neglected their jobs. In addition, some villagers in Azerbaijan and Kurdish areas complained that children were not learning Persian because the corpsman could speak their own language. As a consequence, corpsmen were sent to villages in scattered parts of the country. But people were not happy either, and many villagers – whose mother tongue was Turkish or a Kurdish language or dialect – 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”<sup>60</sup>.

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. Besides referring to the poor conditions of village schools, ruined buildings provided with awful hygienic facilities, in his diary Ali Rezavi tells the story of a little boy covered in rugs who carried a crumpled book: “Ignoring the hundreds of people gathered in the school, he loudly said hello and stood in the middle of the courtyard. Some corpsmen walked towards him, took the book out of his hands and asked him to read some passages. The boy read fluently. It was unbelievable, but this five-year old child would read any passage of this book without a mistake. We were all amazed. I felt like crying. The idea of making even only one child literate had shaken me. The others would not leave the child alone. Everyone would ask him something, but he could not speak Persian, he *could just read* the book fluently. His clothes were thorn apart, maybe he had been wearing them for years. He was not wearing shoes and, therefore, his feet were very dirty”<sup>61</sup>.

Corpsmen were at first supposed to spend fourteen months in the villages, but this period was soon extended to eighteen months. They carried on a wide range of activities, linked to the aims mentioned before: they taught in elementary schools (*dabestan*) twenty to twenty-five children above 7 up to the fourth grade, that is two years less than pupils in towns. Textbooks covered the usual primary school subjects. If a class

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<sup>58</sup> B.V. Street, *Literacy in Theory and Practice*, Cambridge, 1993, p. 207.

<sup>59</sup> Sanghvi et al., 1967, p. 17.

<sup>60</sup> 10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps - Growing Maturity*, NARA.

<sup>61</sup> Passage of Ali Rezavi's unpublished diary, 4 Khordad 1345 (25/5/1966).

was consisted of over thirty-five pupils, an additional corpsman was supposedly sent<sup>62</sup>.

The textbooks used by the Literacy Corps were prepared by Franklin Book Programs Inc., which also published *Peyk-e Mo'allem*, a fortnightly magazine modelled after the *American Scholastic*, produced for distribution to the newly literate villagers and sold at a very low price through the literacy corpsmen. Moreover, *Peyk* was accompanied by instructions to the teacher on how to present the magazine and contained instructive stories with pictures and games; in 1965 the issues had no advertisement but Homayoun Sanati, vice-president of Franklin Book Programs Inc. and director of Franklin's operations in Iran, told the American Embassy in Tehran that the management was evaluating the possibility of accepting advertisements bearing in mind that fertilizers would have been acceptable - because deemed to be of value to the villagers - whilst sheer nylon hosiery would not. Having organized a partial evaluation of the Literacy Corps programme at the end of December 1965, Franklin Book Programs Inc. sent out a team of experienced teachers. Despite the first reports being disappointing and the fact that 27 out of 29 villages used a Turkish dialect rather than Persian, the survey found out that "after they had given tests to pupils at various levels, those who had taken the Literacy Corps course could read Persian of the appropriate level and the large majority could understand what they were reading"<sup>63</sup>.

Yet, for the literacy corpsmen life in the villages also meant coping with situations not stated in advance. For instance, though expected to work on different levels, corpsmen were not supposed to side with a particular group against another. Therefore, the realm of law and order was not included among their duties<sup>64</sup>. However, Hassan Irandoost played a role in a fight over a piece of land shared by two owners who had divided it with a line which their herds did not recognize and thus continued to graze in the other's field<sup>65</sup>. Karamali Azardar remembered being asked to solve local disputes about land and between husband and wife<sup>66</sup>. Ali Sadeghian was asked to act as judge in family quarrels and in arguments between farmers. He reported the case of a wife who argued with her husband and returned to her parents' house. After six months her husband went to pick her up but her father asked him for money, claiming his daughter had spent six months with her family and therefore her husband had to pay for the food<sup>67</sup>!

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<sup>62</sup> Sanghvi et al., 1967, p. 8, 19.

<sup>63</sup> 25 February 1965, n. A-452, *The Literacy Corps - An Apparent Success*, NARA.

<sup>64</sup> Birjandi, 1966, p. 22.

<sup>65</sup> Interview, Tehran, 15 May 1997.

<sup>66</sup> Interview, Tehran, 18 May 1997.

<sup>67</sup> Interview, Tehran, 13 May 1997.

### *Difficulties*

The inaccessibility of some villages in terms of communications and means of transport, the inadequacy of accommodation and of educational facilities at the village level, and the lack of prompt and careful supervision reportedly constituted the main impediments to the success of the Literacy Corps to which was sometimes added a limited understanding of the programme<sup>68</sup>.

Every region, town and village presented its own particular problems in connection with children education. Transport, climate, local uses and economy constituted physical difficulties which were different from one place to the other. For instance, snow could isolate some villages and therefore influence school attendance<sup>69</sup>.

Regarding the inadequacy of supervision, "the cutback in the number of corpsmen slated to attend college after service does not augur well for the future, since 150 out of each group of 200 were slated to become supervisors after one year of study. Transportation for supervisors is still a headache; but it is being somewhat relieved by a fund of two million rials which the Plan Organization has made available for interest-free loans (80,000 rials each loan) to supervisors to purchase vehicles". However, according to Birjandi, when the loan arrangements were being made no one had thought of car insurance and thus a great deal of scurrying took place around to find more funds<sup>70</sup>.

A further difficulty occurred when corpsmen professed a different religion from the peasantry. On one side, the Ministry of Education failed to use adequately its members of non-Moslem faiths. Sometimes tolerated as teachers despite regulations to the contrary, they were not allowed to hold responsible administrative posts<sup>71</sup>. 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 on the London based newspaper *Ettela'at International*, in which a literacy corpsman remembered his experience in 1968-1969 (1347) in a Kurdish village<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>68</sup> S. Mostafavi-Redjali and M.A. Toussi, "The Education Corps in Iran - A New Experiment in the Expansion of Education", in G.Z.F. Bereday and J.A. Lauwerys (eds.), *The World Year Book of Education. The Education Explosion*, London, 1965, p. 404.

<sup>69</sup> G. Porte, K.R. Sohrab, D.S. Voheidi, *Rapport de Recherche de L'Institut International de Planification de L'Education (créé par l'UNESCO), Expérimentation d'une méthodologie de carte scolaire en Mazandaran*, Paris, 1978, pp. 23, 96.

<sup>70</sup> 10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps - Growing Maturity*, NARA.

<sup>71</sup> C. Hendershot, *Politics, Polemics and Pedagogues*, New York, 1975, p. 72.

<sup>72</sup> "Khatereh-ye mikoshami", in *Ettela'at 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. On one side, corpsmen overlooked the local literacy practices. On the other side, rural family life constituted "the most stubborn core of resistance to change"<sup>73</sup>.

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. It would be interesting – though difficult due to the fact that at that time they were already old and are unlikely to be still alive – to check if the corpsmen somehow influenced the mullahs. Adjusting to such a difficult environment was not easy. In order to obtain the villagers' confidence, corpsmen opted for various strategies, ranging from reciting the Koran every day and asking all 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<sup>74</sup>.

Since the Literacy Corps taught only up to the sixth grade, an additional difficulty regarded how to provide secondary education. And the increased rate of migration from the land to the cities caused a housing shortage and the appearance of slums in the outer quarters of towns. Social development was accelerated, especially in remote regions, as a consequence of the presence of the Literacy Corps and of the rapid diffusion of radio and television sets. Families started to desire a better future for their children, in terms of non-manual jobs in the employment of the government. However, the corpsmen's teaching method did not refer to the reality of rural life and was instead based on the memorization of abstruse concepts. But this feature did not match the aims of the White Revolution, in terms of creating better workers and farmers in order to promote the modernization of the country.

### *Evaluation*

Assessing the results of the Literacy Corps programme is not easy because of the lack of reliable information, the problem of authenticity of statistical data, and of the many changes which took place in the period under review. The achievements of the Literacy Corps were judged both by the Iranian government and by UNESCO, IBE (International Bureau of Education) and other consultants.

A problem relevant for the success of education is represented by the population growth which greatly exceeded the speed of building schools

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<sup>73</sup> B.V. Street, *Cultural Meanings of Illiteracy*, Geneva, 1990, pp. 8-11.

<sup>74</sup> H. Faris, *Conscription of urban youths for rural education and development in developing countries: Iran as a case study*, Ph.D, the American Univ., Washington D.C., 1975, p. 300.

and other educational facilities. In the period from 1966 to 1972 the absolute number of illiterates actually rose by an additional 966,000. The population growth made the government's target of 100% literacy practically unattainable to be met by 1985. A faster growth in the literacy rate with viable quality standards was considered beyond Iran's economic capacity<sup>75</sup>. Official figures show that – with an average cost per student of around 13 dollars while the comparable figure for a conventional school was more than three times as much – the operating expenses of the Literacy Corps involved the minimal costs<sup>76</sup>. Ordinary public schooling absorbed 85.5% of the total educational cost, the Literacy Corps only 5.2% and private schooling 9.3%<sup>77</sup>. Part of the low cost of the Literacy Corps school was due to the fact that current expenditure could be equated with recurrent costs – and thus to salaries – and that literacy corpsmen were paid much less than ordinary teachers and rural instructors<sup>78</sup>.

The cost per pupil enrolled in an ordinary school (279 tomans) was 72% higher than the cost per pupil taught by the Literacy Corps (162 tomans). However, in the schools run by the Literacy Corps the retention rate was lower and this was perceived by the authorities and by the educational experts as a major problem. In 1978 Porte, a UNESCO consultant, considered the Literacy Corps less efficient than the rest of the educational system. Nonetheless, he underlined how the Literacy Corps did play a role in attracting rural people towards the school and in pushing them towards further education<sup>79</sup>. The corpsmen's activities were also analyzed in terms of school buildings, mosques and mortuaries built and repaired, kilometers of road built, *qanats* repaired, demonstration farms, trees planted, drinking wells, parent-teacher associations, scouts, public baths and desks<sup>80</sup>.

However, while examining these reports it is important to bear in mind the propaganda about the White Revolution and the Literacy Corps itself. Accounts and favourable comments on the activities of the Literacy Corps also frequently appeared in the Iranian press. For instance in 1975, on the occasion of the anniversary of the White Revolution, an article by Hossein al-Ebrahimi in *Kayhan* praised the Literacy Corps as an

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<sup>75</sup> R. Mallat, *Literacy Projection for Iran's Population over 6 Years of Age*, Tehran, 1975, p. 28, 32, 34.

<sup>76</sup> M.A. Farjad, *System of Education in Iran*, Tehran, 1978, pp. 7, 18-19.

<sup>77</sup> J. Hallak, M. Cheikhestani and H. Varlet, *The financial aspects of first-level education in Iran*, UNESCO, Paris, 1972, p. 25.

<sup>78</sup> Hallak et al., 1972, pp. 8-9, 14.

<sup>79</sup> G. Porte, *Etude sur les taux d'écoulement des effectifs et sur le rendement interne des divers niveaux d'enseignement*, Tehran, January 1978, p. 9.

<sup>80</sup> P. Ronduen (UNESCO), *A report on visit to education corps schools, Khorassan Province*, Tehran, 1966.

effective and revolutionary means against illiteracy through which knowledge penetrated into the most remote parts of the country and the gap between urban and rural areas was reduced<sup>81</sup>.

Apart from the press, the Pahlavis' propaganda machine used other tools, and a documentary broadcast in 1974 under the title *The King's Revolution* reported the benefits of the White Revolution and linked its results to oil production. In connection with the Literacy Corps: "In a desert village a thousand miles from Tehran the kids are going to morning school. When the Shah came to power he determined to conquer one of the persistent elements of the developing nations: widespread illiteracy. So he founded the Literacy Corps. Every Iranian young men and some women have to do two years military service. If they are already reasonably educated they don't march up and down the whole time. Instead, they go out and teach people less fortunate to read and write, that surprisingly essential to join the modern world. It's quite incredible, almost a whole army dedicated to educating people. It is all very military but it gets results. The Literacy Corps was so successful that the idea has been extended. The Health Corps brings medical aid and doctors to areas where doctors are thin on the ground, to say the least. It costs a lot of money to do this. It all comes from oil"<sup>82</sup>.

#### *General consequences*

Two decades of White Revolution and industrial accumulation improved standards of living "in absolute terms for the working class". At the same time, however, "deprivations deepened, differences widened, and disparities became even more transparent". In Hakimian's words, the combination of these factors can answer "the apparent paradox of sustained accumulation and growing absolute prosperity with outbursts of mass agitation and discontent"<sup>83</sup>.

In this connection, the Literacy Corps had a relatively significant political impact because of its role as "an effective vehicle for the consolidation and expansion of the power of the central government in the rural areas and for political control". In fact, 76.5% of the 430 corpsmen interviewed by Faris declared they had given the required talks on subjects related to government policies and patriotism. Celebrating official events inevitably helped the government's propaganda, pushed

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<sup>81</sup> H. al-Ebrahimi, "Sepah-e danesh, mazhar-e pishraft-e fekr-ye ejtema'-e Iran" in *Kayhan*, 6 Bahman 1353 (26 January 1975). Praises also in "En'ekas-e sepah-e danesh" in *Kayhan*, 6 Bahman 1353 (26 January 1975).

<sup>82</sup> Documentary from the archives of Movietones Ltd, 1974.

<sup>83</sup> H. Hakimian, "Industrialization and the standard of living of the working class in Iran, 1960-1979", in *Development and Change*, vol. 19, 1988, p. 30.

forward Iranian secular nationalism and presumably contributed “to the awareness and national identification of the villagers”<sup>84</sup>.

Then, since religion was a minor topic, with the implementation of the Literacy Corps education to some extent escaped the control of the ulema who used to shape the younger generation along traditional lines, spending plenty of time on the teaching of the Koran. Therefore, the modernization process and the spread of secular education promoted by the White Revolution was an attempt to undermine the ulema’s power and influence. Equally, a further step which radicalized the mullahs’ discontent was taken in 1971, when a royal decree established the Religious Corps as a training course for religious leaders who would bring to rural areas a progressive religion in line with the Pahlavi ideology of modernization.

Finally, the Literacy Corps promoted a new awareness of the rural areas among Iranian intellectuals. Those most influenced by this new awareness belonged to the frustrated ‘minor’ intelligentsia composed of teachers, one of the driving forces of the revolution of 1979, when they played a radical and organized role. According to the British ex-diplomat Desmond Harney, at the beginning of the 1960s teachers were the most vocal and radical of the growing movements of protest. In 1961, under Amini’s government – Harney recalls – Derakhshesh held a meeting as Minister of Education. Derakhshesh looked like a bold person, people asked questions and became involved in the discussion and more and more excited. Such a situation was undoubtedly ‘normal’ to Western observers, but rather unusual at the shah’s time. Harney judged it “weird and exceptional”, and this is probably the reason why his memory of this event is still so vivid<sup>85</sup>.

However, after the Revolution of 1979 a major purge took place among teachers, they were obliged to take a part in the mullahs’ propaganda, and carefully avoided criticizing the regime in public. Deviation was not tolerated and those who did not comply with the rules were dismissed<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>84</sup> Faris, 1975, p. 341, 270.

<sup>85</sup> D. Harney, *The Priest and the King*, London, 1999, p. 151, and interview, London, 15 April 1999.

<sup>86</sup> Anonymous, “Current Political Attitudes in an Iranian Village”, in *Iranian Studies*, vol. 16, n. 1-2, winter-spring 1983, pp. 22-28, and “Political Attitudes in an Iranian Village: a Follow-up”, in *Iranian Studies*, vol. 17, n. 4, Autumn 1984, pp. 453-466. Interview with Rohanghiz Lashgari, Tehran, 15 May 1997, obliged to quit her job because of her non-Islamic attitude.

*Consequences on the villagers' side*

Having a literate population did not make a difference for the Islamic Revolution. In fact, Khomeini succeeded in his attempt to overthrow the regime not through leaflets read by the new literates, but through sermons and speeches recorded on tapes smuggled into Iran from his exile or transmitted via long-distance telephone calls from Najaf and Paris to his supporters, "courtesy of sympathetic telephone operators and at His Majesty's expense"<sup>87</sup>.

As for the villagers who moved to towns – more than 6.2 million in the period 1966-1982 – and became urban poor, the factor that brought them towards the revolution of 1979 was not that they were literate, but other social and economic factors such as the decline in oil prices in the late 1970s, the following increase in unemployment, and rising discontent over government corruption and expenses<sup>88</sup>. In the case of workers in modern industry (oil, petrochemicals, manufacturing, and utilities), they were "structurally differentiated", politically and ideologically divided, and "the last social stratum to join the general strike that spread throughout 1978"<sup>89</sup>.

At village level, the Literacy Corps gave the impression that the Shah was implementing good policies and thus created a positive perception on the villagers' side. Furthermore, the Literacy Corps filled the gap created by the land reform and by the consequent decrease in the large landlords' power. In this connection, corpsmen were reported to be seen by the villagers with high regard and affection<sup>90</sup>. He was "recognized by all the elements in the community where he is looked upon as a personification of loyalty, industry, good conduct, and public service. He is considered an authority not only on educational affairs, but also on matters affecting community welfare"<sup>91</sup>.

However, in the long run "the rising expectation and growing demand of an increasingly awakened, literate, and politicized peasantry" could

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<sup>87</sup> M. Tehranian, "Islamic Fundamentalism in Iran and the Discourse of Development", in M.E. Marty and R.S. Appleby (eds.), *Fundamentalism and Society: reclaiming the sciences, the family, and education*, Chicago, 1993, p. 353.

<sup>88</sup> E. Abrahamian, *Iran Between Two Revolutions*, Princeton, 1982, and A.H. Danesh, *Rural Exodus & Squatter Settlements in the Third World, Case of Iran*, Lanham, 1987, p. 82.

<sup>89</sup> V. Moghadam, "Industrial development, culture and working-class politics", in *International Sociology*, vol. 2, 1987, p. 153.

<sup>90</sup> Amongst others, Johannes Farhadian, London, 13 May 1999.

<sup>91</sup> P. Ronduen, *Final report of the UNESCO Technical Assistance Mission in Iran*, Tehran, 1968, p. 2, and Rezavi's diary.

affect stability. Moreover, the politicization of the peasantry, the teaching of Persian and civics were seen as “potentially significant factors in advancing the cause of national unity and identification”<sup>92</sup>.

By implementing the White Revolution, the Iranian government had showed for the first time an interest in the development of the countryside. And “though its educational impact may be limited, the psychological and political consequences of the Literacy Corps are likely to be of great importance” because they increased the villagers’ expectations<sup>93</sup>. Yet, such expectations were mostly going to be disappointed and thus caused frustration because few students ended primary school and even fewer had access to secondary school<sup>94</sup>.

Teaching literacy helped the passage from a traditional to a ‘modern’ society. Besides teaching the so-called three R’s, the Literacy Corps instructed children in other topics directly related to their environment. However, when a country shifts from a traditional mode to an industrialized and urban society, many social changes inevitably take place. Many landless peasants left their villages and migrated to urban areas. Those leaving were mainly young men who had received some education and thus had more opportunities to find a job. Therefore, education played a major role in removing young men from the rural economy<sup>95</sup>. And, in fact, data demonstrate that new migrants were more likely to find a job in the government, that is one of those jobs created by the regime after the rise in oil prices in 1973 in order to subsidize unemployment<sup>96</sup>.

Migrations from rural areas to towns affected the urban environment, which was not prepared to cope with the new inhabitants who lived in slums and whose knowledge of sanitation, hygiene, diet and birth control was extremely low. Major social problems also derived from rising expectations, both in towns and villages, in terms of facilities, education and job opportunities. Women’s expectations also increased<sup>97</sup>. And in the period concerned village women - mainly traditional, relatively uneducated and from the lower classes - were reported as politically quite

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<sup>92</sup> Faris, 1975, p. 342.

<sup>93</sup> Szyliowicz, 1973, p. 418.

<sup>94</sup> Ryan, 1973, p. 138, 139.

<sup>95</sup> J. Connell, “Economic Review: Economic Change in an Iranian Village”, in *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 28, summer 1974, n. 3, p. 314.

<sup>96</sup> M.R. Brown, “The Adjustment of Migrants to Tehran, Iran”, in C. Goldscheider (ed.), *Urban Development in Developing Nations. Patterns and Problems of Adjustment*, Boulder, 1983, p. 204.

<sup>97</sup> Interview with Ali Rezavi, London, 10 April 1999.

active, in line with a “tradition of political participation and struggle in community politics by women”<sup>98</sup>.

In addition, the quick rise in the cost of rents had a detrimental effect on the low income of the “nonsquatting poor migrants”, who thus lost any hope of ever being able to buy their own property. Behind the rising costs was an annual inflation rate of 30% causing a rapid increase in the price of food and everything else but not bread, which was subsidized by the government, afraid of the people’s reaction. Last but not least, in 1976 a credit squeeze slackened the development of the building industry, reducing the migrants’ employment opportunities and leaving many of them without a stable income<sup>99</sup>.

Moreover, the beginning of the 1970s were characterized by the oil boom, by a major role of the government in the economy and by rapid industrialization. All these factors led to a worsening in income inequality, especially in the towns in favour of profit earners and government employees against workers, but also against rural areas. A clear example of income inequality is given by the ratio of consumption in urban areas to rural regions: while in 1963 this ratio was 2.15 (that is, urban consumption was more than double compared with rural areas), in 1976 it had gone up to 4.84 (almost five times more)<sup>100</sup>.

For those who stayed in their villages, the main changes were brought by the land reform which “produced irreversible changes in landownership and tenure relations, changes that in turn have generated long-term modifications in the social structure and in the economic organization of villages”. In social terms, the land reform “indissolubly linked the Iranian village to the urban centers” and the villagers’ periodic migrations made many urban manufactured goods available to the countryside. Nonetheless, on the occasion of the revolution of 1979 only the inhabitants of towns took part in the demonstrations, while peasants kept a “sceptic distance” and only after the success of the Islamic Revolution entered the political scene and presented their own demands<sup>101</sup>.

Another change for villagers was that education promoted a tremendous social transformation, in the sense that literacy became a

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<sup>98</sup> M.E. Hegland, “Political Roles of Iranian Village Women”, in *MERIP*, January-February 1986, pp. 14-19, 46.

<sup>99</sup> A. Kazemi, *Poverty and Revolution in Iran. The Migrant Poor, Urban Marginality and Politics*, New York, 1980, p. 89.

<sup>100</sup> S.M. Shafaeddin, “Some cause of worsening of income inequality in Iran during the oil boom of the mid-1970s, a Kalechi-Riach approach”, in *Scandinavian Journal of Development Alternatives*, vol. 8, n. 2, June 1989, pp. 123-137.

<sup>101</sup> A. Najmabadi, *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran*, Salt Lake City, 1987, p. 164, 197. E.J. Hooglund’s position (*Land and Revolution in Iran, 1960-1980*, Austin, 1982) is completely different.

way for people to become more powerful. For instance, people sometimes needed to go to the gendarmes and change their identity card for some reason such as declaring a different age in order to start school or to avoid military service. Villagers used to ask the *kadkhoda* to accompany them. Being now able to speak Persian, write and stand up like children do in a class, villagers did not need to rely on the *kadkhoda* as much as they used to<sup>102</sup>.

Last but not least, the achievements of the Literacy Corps have to be judged within the framework of the White Revolution and, in particular, of the land reform which “made their work possible”. According to Arsanjani, minister of agriculture in 1962, the success of the land reform was dependent on the improvement of the peasants’ living conditions, which could be raised only if the villager “was first given responsibility for the management of his own affairs”<sup>103</sup>. And in fact, my interviewee Hossein Fayaz Torshizi – author of an autobiography on his experience in the Literacy Corps – reported this as one of his major achievements while serving in this programme<sup>104</sup>.

In 1969 Lambton observed how the villager started for the first time to “feel that his voice counted for something, and even that he had a responsibility towards the country and the community”. Amongst the factors who contributed to this change was the “absence of any foreign influence or intervention” in the land reform. Accordingly, in rural areas a “movement of change” began and a demand of education took place, but above all, this movement of change is expressed in the new sense of purpose, independence, and self-reliance of the peasants, and the emergence of leaders in the co-operatives<sup>105</sup>.

Though Lambton considered “their strength and numbers not yet great”, a study on the distribution of political attitudes in different groups in an Iranian village in the aftermath of the Islamic Revolution (1980-1981) shows that age was the most relevant factor in political orientation: only the younger generation (below 25 and therefore only those who had presumably been taught by the Literacy Corps) was really politicized<sup>106</sup>.

Though not politically committed, the older generation was against the mullahs because they were grateful to the shah for the improvements in education and in village conditions which had taken place in the last

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<sup>102</sup> Interview with Ismail Bayani, Venice, 21 September 1998.

<sup>103</sup> A.K.S. Lambton, *The Persian Land Reform 1962-1969*, Oxford, 1969, p. 193, 64.

<sup>104</sup> H.F. Torshizi, *Amuzegar rustai-e Orte-Cheshmeh*, Tehran, 1998, pp. 90-107.

<sup>105</sup> Lambton, 1969, pp. 347-348, 351-352.

<sup>106</sup> Lambton, 1969, p. 352, and Anonymous, 1983, pp. 3-4.

fifteen years, and because they remembered how the local cleric used to side with the landlords and play a double game<sup>107</sup>.

The educated youth had “sharply polarized” political views, ranging from the extreme left to the extreme right. Two-thirds of the village’s university students were leftist – followers of the Tudeh, of the Mojahedin and of some independent Marxist groups – and thus mirrored the general situation at the Iranian universities, but in their villages were isolated and therefore unable to spread their ideas. Besides being more educated, leftists mainly came from higher economic and “religiously sophisticated” backgrounds, but took off from their family level and moved from their fathers’ traditional version to their own modern version, creating a wide generational gap. Yet, leftist attitudes were absent and political ideas were, at any rate, less elaborate and explicit among those young peasants who had no higher education and had become workers and low-level government employees. Some of these less educated young peasants belonged to the centre and the right, and some defined themselves *hezbollahis* (belonging to the Party of God)<sup>108</sup>.

#### *Consequences on the corpsmen’s side*

Within this framework, the exposure to rural life of the young urban middle-class youth serving in the Literacy Corps led to different consequences, some of them unleashed by the gap in living conditions between rural and urban areas and the large amount of money the regime was spending on other projects such as celebrations. Ali Rezavi noted how “the corpsman in charge was more affected by the environment than viceversa. I thought it was unbearable to imagine that amongst such a beautiful nature we were in a place which looked more like a garbage place where people lived. It was like a dream. Though a few moments ago I was looking at the most beautiful sceneries I would have liked that both of them, the beautiful scenery and the horrible village, were no more than a dream because seeing the ruins was more difficult than accepting the natural beauties. He greeted us coldly and in a peculiar way. You could see many things in the expression of his face. Through the street there was a canal full of dirty things and weeds which you could see disappearing through the street. The street was falling apart. Almost all the roofs were a storage place for animals’ stool (used for heating) and the smell was disgusting. The street led to an open area. A dog which has been following us from the barracks was still happily with us. The dog’s feet were very dirty but his loyalty towards us made him come all this way with us. There was a storm which would blow

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<sup>107</sup> Anonymous, 1983, p. 6.

<sup>108</sup> Anonymous, 1983, pp. 12-22.

sand and dust in our faces and this made the village look more horrific and disgusting. It was unbearable to me to imagine that amongst such a beautiful nature we were in a place which looked more like a garbage place where people lived. It was like a dream. Though a few moments ago I was gazing at the most beautiful sceneries I would have preferred that both of them (the beautiful scenery and the horrible village) were no more than a dream because seeing the ruins was more difficult than accepting the beauties”<sup>109</sup>.

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” though, “in view of the size of the Corps, the incidence did not seem overly significant”<sup>110</sup>. In contrast, some corpsmen declared that their experience in the countryside had strengthened their support for the regime<sup>111</sup>. For instance, the historian Mohamad 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”<sup>112</sup>.

In addition, many of the corpsmen’s parents were influenced by their “children’s new-found radicalism” and the political impact of the Literacy Crusade was thus larger than generally thought<sup>113</sup>. According to a survey, 82.3% 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. 8% declared they had become “more aware of the inefficiency and inertia of the government bureaucracy”<sup>114</sup>.

According to my interviewee Ali Rezavi, 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 labour and to rule over people. Along with this thought, with the White Revolution imperialist countries supposedly wanted the villagers to migrate to towns, increase

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<sup>109</sup> Passage of Rezavi’s unpublished diary, 15 Khordad 1345 (5 June 1966).

<sup>110</sup> 10 May 1966, n. A-749, *The Literacy Corps - Growing Maturity*, NARA.

<sup>111</sup> Interview with Johanes Farhadian, London, 13 May 1999.

<sup>112</sup> 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.

<sup>113</sup> Street, 1984, p. 206.

<sup>114</sup> Faris, 1975, p. 313, 316-317.

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 while offering tea and sugar cubes in his room in the village, and his gramophone was playing an Alinazar record loved by the Kurdish people. At that time, this corpsman was a leftist and was trying to make propaganda against the shah’s White Revolution. After several months, Darvish Mahmud – a dervish who spent his time travelling, reciting poetry and collecting money – told my interviewee: “*Sarkar* (title for the corpsman), listen, up to four years ago any bride in the village would have had to go and spend her first night with the landlord or his sons, if they wanted to do so. Therefore, 50% of the children of our village are illegitimate. Everything changed four years ago, 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?”<sup>115</sup>.

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. For instance, my interviewee Ismail Bayani stated that after having watched the television programme on Golsorkhi’s trial, 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 Golsorkhi’s death sentence, but it was also the result of his personal experience. In fact, at the beginning of the 1970s Bayani was directly involved in the *Feda’in-e Khalq*, which he joined after a period spent attending Shariati’s lectures at the Hoseyniyyeh-ye Ershad and leading a group of pro-Islamist students. Before entering university, Bayani had served as literacy corpsman in a village in Mazandaran and this experience helped the shaping of his political thought. In fact, 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, Bayani declared that serving in the Literacy Corps surely had an impact on his political activism<sup>116</sup>.

In connection with leftist ideas, it is worth noting that “in spite of the concentration of wealth and a constant deterioration in income

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<sup>115</sup> Interview, London, 10 April 1999.

<sup>116</sup> Interview with Ismail Bayani, Venice, 21 September 1998.

distribution – which theoretically form the basis of class struggle – the Iranian revolution was not restricted to any particular class”<sup>117</sup>.

In a country such as Iran, with a strong nationalistic tradition, the Tudeh party had a limited appeal because of its dependence on foreign powers. Furthermore, the Pahlavis’ repression “created an unfavourable atmosphere for the radical left to penetrate the working class”. In the case of peasants, although in other developing countries they had been the target of Marxist groups, in the case of Iran they seemed to have “no class consciousness and no revolutionary potential”. The main reasons for this lack of revolutionary and leftist attitude were the geographical scattering of villages which made communication and unified action difficult, and the fact that the local mullahs had always emphasized the Islamic conception of the sanctity of private property<sup>118</sup>. In addition, “The individual peasant and nomad had no feeling of solidarity with members of his own class. On the contrary, he viewed all outsiders with suspicion, and looked upon his landlord and chief as his protector against other peasants and tribesmen. In such an environment, political action occurred only when ordered by the khans and landlords”<sup>119</sup>.

*Consequences for the Iranian Armed Forces*

“The Army’s role in assisting in the organization and training of the uniformed Literacy Corps” seemed to have been “a source of some pride to Iranian officers”. As a consequence, the White Revolution had “significantly under-cut outright opposition to the regime among officers and, to a lesser extent, has reduced general dissatisfaction”. However, the “revolution from the top” had to be helped by large economic, social and military changes. It was also underlined how “radical changes always carry with them the chance of revolution from some segment of the society – usually the military”<sup>120</sup>. Yet, history proved that the Iranian religious forces actually had a more revolutionary soul than the military.

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<sup>117</sup> N. Momayezi, “Decimation and fragmentation of leftist forces in Iran”, in *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 11, 1987, n. 1-2, p. 84.

<sup>118</sup> Momayezi, 1987, pp. 86-87.

<sup>119</sup> E. Abrahamian, *Social Bases of Iranian Politics: the Tudeh Party, 1941-1953*, Ph.D, Columbia University, 1969, p. 45.

<sup>120</sup> 27 August 1963, n. A-128, *Reliability of the Iranian Officer Corps*, NARA, DEF 6 Iran.

*Conclusions*

This article has argued that the Literacy Corps programme had an impact not only on the literacy rate of the Iranian population living in rural areas, but also on the perception of the regime by the corpsmen. In fact, this experience made some corpsmen realize how wide the gap between urban and rural areas really was. It raised further a political consciousness which had already existed in many corpsmen and was shared by other social groups. Some corpsmen thus became more radicalized in their political ideas against the regime and participated in the Revolution of 1979.