



Examining the Poverty Alleviation Policies of the First Pahlavi Government Based on the Developmental State Theory (Case Study: Isfahan)

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Abstract

Poverty, both a cause and a consequence of underdevelopment, was one of the defining characteristics of the Qajar period, exacerbated by the country's occupation during the First World War. In such a situation, society sought a leader who could create unity, ensure security, promote growth and development, and, above all, eliminate the factors contributing to backwardness. Reza Shah rose to power in response to these contemporary conditions and implemented measures aimed at developing the country and addressing poverty, which was considered one of the key indicators and consequences of underdevelopment. The aim of this research is to examine the poverty alleviation policies of the First Pahlavi government through the lens of developmental state theory, with a particular focus on the city of Isfahan. It seeks to answer the question of what measures Reza Shah implemented to alleviate poverty and how effective his efforts were in this regard. This study employs a descriptive-analytical approach, drawing on archival documents and local publications.

The findings indicate that Reza Shah's government, in pursuit of national development and modernization, undertook various measures to combat poverty. These included providing housing for the poor, offering cash assistance, distributing food and clothing, and ensuring access to free education and healthcare services. Although these initiatives had some impact on reducing educational, health, and welfare-related poverty, the absence of a sustained poverty alleviation strategy within the ruling system, combined with the fall of the government following the country's re-occupation during World War II, meant that poverty remained widespread. The authoritarian and developmentalist government of Reza Shah emerged as a response to the challenges faced by the weak central government, including the rise of centrifugal forces, tribal rebellions, local uprisings, and the occupation of the country by Allied forces during the First World War. The lack of security and stability, economic and social underdevelopment, and poor infrastructure in education, healthcare, and transportation were among its defining characteristics. In such a context, many political and social groups sought a government capable of restoring unity, security, and prosperity, steering the country toward power and modernization. Reza Shah, who had demonstrated a strong and reformist character during his tenure as Minister of War (1921–1923) and Prime Minister (1923–1925) by suppressing ethnic and tribal revolts and restoring



security, gained the support of various factions, including intellectuals, nationalists, merchants, clerics, certain political figures, members of the Fifth Parliament, and even foreign powers. As a result, he replaced the Qajar dynasty and intensified efforts to modernize and industrialize the country, relying on the military, the royal court, and the newly established bureaucracy.

In pursuit of centralized power, authoritarianism, developmentalism, and modernization, Reza Shah systematically eliminated or marginalized anything he perceived as an obstacle. His policies included the forced resettlement of nomadic groups, the weakening of the clergy, the suppression and marginalization of many intellectuals and politicians, and direct confrontations with religious institutions, superstitions, the hijab, disease, illiteracy, and poverty. At the same time, he prioritized the expansion of education, healthcare, transportation, employment, and public welfare—fundamental pillars of development in any modern state. His policies and initiatives in poverty alleviation can be understood within this broader developmentalist and modernization-oriented framework.

The key distinctions of this research compared to previous studies are as follows: First, it examines the relationship between poverty and development during Reza Shah's era, analyzing poverty alleviation policies within the framework of developmentalism. Second, the concept of poverty in this study specifically refers to economically disadvantaged individuals who struggle to meet basic needs such as food, clothing, and housing. Unlike other studies, the focus is not on beggars, vagrants, or other marginalized groups. Third, the research is confined to the 16-year rule of Reza Shah and specifically focuses on the city of Isfahan. This regional focus allows for a more in-depth and detailed analysis, particularly given the availability of archival documents from Isfahan, which provide more comprehensive insights into the poverty alleviation policies of the First Pahlavi government compared to other cities.

The findings of this research indicate that Reza Shah implemented various measures to modernize the country, eliminate signs of poverty, insecurity, and backwardness, and, at the same time, consolidate his absolute power. These measures included the forced settlement of nomadic groups, the weakening of the clergy, and efforts to combat superstitions, the veil, disease, illiteracy, and poverty. Additionally, he introduced reforms in administration, the military, and the judiciary, education, healthcare, transportation, industry, employment, and public welfare—sectors that form the fundamental infrastructure for societal development.

Regarding poverty, which was seen as a key indicator of underdevelopment, his policies included gathering and settling the poor, providing cash assistance and monthly pensions, distributing food and clothing, offering free education and healthcare, and creating employment opportunities. While these initiatives had some impact on alleviating poverty, particularly in education, health, and welfare, poverty remained widespread due to the absence of a genuine commitment to social justice within the ruling system. Furthermore, the fall of Reza Shah's government and the reoccupation of the country during World War II contributed to the persistence of poverty.

Keywords: Poverty alleviation, Pahlavi first, developmental state, Isfahan, poor.

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