

An A Study and Analysis of the Educational Activities of the Church Missionary Society in Kerman from the Constitutional Era to the End of the First Pahlavi Period

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ABSTRACT

The Constitutional Revolution brought about significant transformations in Iran's modern history, moving the traditional Qajar-era society toward modernity and drawing the state's attention to educational issues. The emergence of modern education and the felt need for new foundations of modern civilization coincided with the arrival of Western missionary delegations, particularly the Church Missionary Society. While these groups ostensibly provided educational, cultural, and medical services, their underlying aim was the promotion and propagation of Christianity. Adopting a descriptive-analytical method and a historical approach based on both domestic and foreign sources and documents, this study examines the educational activities of the Church Missionary Society in the city of Kerman and seeks to answer the question of what role and objectives the Society pursued in expanding education there. The research findings show that although the Church Missionary Society's actions, including the establishment of new schools, played an important role in promoting education in the city of Kerman, it failed to achieve its main goal of spreading Christianity due to the resistance of the people, the opposition of the government, and the scholars.

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Introduction:

From the Qajar period (1796–1925), diplomacy and the policy of influence through modern education and the Western-style instruction of children replaced traditional military methods. The British, in pursuit of their colonial objectives in Iran-especially in Kerman-settled in the region and, with the support of the Protestant Church, established schools and promoted modern education. They also built hospitals and introduced Western medical practices in the mentioned areas. The political, social, and cultural transformations of the Qajar era confronted Iranian society with conditions markedly different from its traditional environment. Intellectuals of this period recognized the necessity of reform within society. The first modern-style schools in Iran were founded by foreign missionaries. These schools initiated a form of social mobility that placed traditional and modern ways of thinking in opposition to each other. Ultimately, the modernist movement, by adopting methods suited to Iranian society, gradually prevailed and overcame the resistance of traditionalists.

Materials and Methods:

This research was conducted using a descriptive and analytical approach. Data collection was carried out through library research and based on existing documents preserved in archival centers, including the National Archives and Library of Iran (SAKMA), the archives of the University of Birmingham (UK), and the Kerman Museum of Education (AGIRA).

Results and Findings:

European countries, seeking to expand their political, economic, and religious influence-the main reasons for their interest in Eastern and traditional societies-began sending missionary and scientific delegations abroad. Gradually, through the promotion of their ideals and objectives, they succeeded in bringing about changes in the traditional structures of Third World countries. Following the Constitutional Revolution, these transformations directed Iran's traditional Qajar-era society toward modernity, leading to a shift in the educational system from traditional methods to the expansion of modern sciences.

In this regard, several points can be noted:

First, these schools employed a teaching method based on “phonetic alphabet instruction,” which proved to be highly effective and beneficial in improving students’ reading and writing abilities.

Second, modern schools introduced new subjects such as science, history, geography, and European languages, which had not been taught in traditional maktab-khanehs (religious schools). The curriculum of these schools combined educational materials inspired by the European model with core subjects such as religious studies, Arabic, and Persian language, which were part of the traditional school system.

The activities of religious missionaries in Iran were mainly pursued through two key institutions: education and healthcare, by establishing modern-style schools and hospitals. In Kerman, the missionaries played an important role in improving literacy levels and the general living conditions of the people through the creation of educational centers. Although archival evidence clearly shows that the association’s charitable activities primarily aimed at promoting Christianity, spreading Western culture, and expanding British political, economic, and religious influence to advance colonial and hegemonic goals, the Mission and Girls’ Schools, through their modern teaching methods and by enrolling a large number of students, succeeded in training many graduates. This, in turn, contributed to raising the economic, social, and cultural standards of Kerman’s society.

Overall, it can be said that these educational activities helped attract public attention toward Western culture and facilitated the missionaries' penetration and influence within Iranian society.

Conclusion:

An examination of the educational activities of the Church Missionary Society in Kerman-from the Constitutional Revolution to the end of the First Pahlavi period-reveals that the society, through the establishment of boys' and girls' schools, sought not only to provide modern education but also to promote Christianity and Western culture. Although these schools played a significant role in improving literacy, introducing modern sciences, and empowering individuals, their underlying goals-namely religious proselytization and cultural infiltration-provoked resistance from the public, the clergy, and the government.

Despite some educational successes, the Missionary Society failed to convert Muslims to Christianity on a large scale. Ultimately, the society's activities represented a combination of positive educational impacts and unsuccessful missionary efforts, which, within the historical context of Kerman, were largely perceived as an instrument of colonial influence rather than purely cultural service.

Keywords: Education, Missionary Society, First Pahlavi Period, Kerman, Constitutional Revolution.