

WORLD HEALTH ORGANIZATION
REGIONAL OFFICE
FOR THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN



ORGANISATION MONDIALE DE LA SANTE
BUREAU REGIONAL
POUR LA MEDITERRANEE ORIENTALE

SEMINAR ON HEALTH PROBLEMS OF NOMADS

EM/SEM.HLTH.PRBS.NOM /8

Shiraz/Isfahan, 22-29 April 1973

ENGLISH ONLY

FUTURE TRENDS IN THE EVOLUTION
OF NOMADIC POPULATIONS

by

Dr. K. Borhanian *
WHO Temporary Adviser

* Faculty of Arts and Sciences, Pahlavi University, Shiraz, Iran

Future Trends in the Evolution of Nomadic Population

By Khosro Borhanian, Dept. of National Development,
Pahlavi University - Shiraz

It is almost an altruism that of all the factors relevant to Middle Eastern pastoral nomadism the political factor has proved to be the fatal factor to its existence. Let us take a country like Iran as our example.

From the dawn of history and long before that Iranian society was composed of three main contingents of urban centers, rural population and tribes whose economic engagements were respectively trade, agriculture and livestock-breeding by way of pastoral nomadism.

In general, in a broader area which covered the plains of Central Asia, the entire Middle East and some parts of Africa, the three social and political elements of towns, villages and tribes and their corresponding economic pursuits of trade, agriculture and animal husbandry stood in such a strong interdependence on each other that the economic geography and human ecology of the region emerged as a symbiosis of these three elements throughout its history. In contrast the political history of the region shows periodic dominance of one element over the others.

At the turn of the present century Iran was ruled by tribal constitution. The towns were both trade centers and political residences of tribal overlords. But the onset of nationalism put an end to tribal dominance. The tribal contingent was declared an anachronism and served only to taint the integrity of national history. As tribal constitution was thought to militate against national integration of people, the awareness of Iranians was diverted toward the two-category society of urban and rural contingents. Thus the history of nationalism started with a policy of deliberate suppression of tribes. The silent movements of nomads were not felt and the black tents which were observed occasionally by townspeople were thought to be a few wandering gypsies. But the suppression of tribes implied systematic destruction of the country's livestock breeding.

Nobody has ever been able to assess the magnitude of livestock breeding at the beginning of this century or the meaning of its destruction in economic history of post-constitutional Iran. But from remnants of pastoral nomadism still existing, it could safely be deduced that livestock breeding was the more important factor of pre-oil economy, that is, even

more important than agriculture and commerce, though the nationalistic emotions had always a way to undermine the population of tribes and their animal stocks.

This is not to repudiate the merits of Iranian nationalism. Perhaps the destruction of native animal husbandry, like many other losses, was the toll Iranians had to pay to save their independence. Planning for economic development, however, for a society of which only a distorted picture is available, while we ignore one of its main economic components, would be equally unrealistic. We have never known the magnitude of pastoral nomadism and its role in Iranian national economy. The figures which have been presented as population of tribes by different sources fluctuate between 500 thousand and 5 millions. (1) The same inconsistency holds true for tribal animal husbandry. The national indifference towards the tribal section of the society manifested itself in inducing the public consensus that tribes must change their way of life and become sedentary as agriculturalists. Settling down was considered to be the symbol of nationalism and agriculture a progressive stage of life. However, due to the exigencies of our time and the pressure of the settled population, becoming sedentary is no longer initiated by the government's encouragement or force. It is happening by itself in every corner of the country and on a very large scale. The only issue which must be of concern is the way it is happening and its consequences.

The following paragraph contains a few points from proceedings of UNESCO symposium on arid zone research of Paris in 1962. This is intended to remind our readers of some of the obstacles and liabilities incurred by sedentization of pastoral nomads.

Usually the pastoral land left by settling nomads are refilled with other nomads and only the encroachment of agriculturalists on the total lands of the pastoral people can break the cycle. However, pastoral areas are normally uneconomical for agricultural development and as a result of this a chronic poverty would develop among the people settled on pastoral lands. The process of abandoning former occupation of animal husbandry and learning to become farmers needs more than a certain amount of courage and effort. Given the difficult task of becoming assimilated into a new community, the adjustment to a farmers' life becomes more cumbersome when encountering problems of acquiring land, water or agricultural techniques lacking the capital to become landowners, or the skill to become craftsmen, or other specialists,

the wholesale assimilation of nomads into a sedentary population can only be achieved at the expense of economic and social downgrading; the nomads can find a place only near the bottom of sedentary society. Moreover, as mentioned before, in areas with an established nomadic minority a situation of economic interdependence tends to develop between the village communities and the nomads where they mutually depend on each others' products and where the whole economy of the area is based on the presence of both groups. The removal from such a system of all the specialized pastoral products can only result in economic decline for the area as a whole. In the social sphere also, a comparison of nomadic and settled communities in their present forms reveals a clear difference in the nomad camp. In spite of recent great advances in public health in the villages, the diet, hygiene and health of all but the poorest nomad communities is better than that of most villages.

Pastoral nomadism is based on a particular type of economy. First pastures are grazed by animal herds, then animal products are utilized by man. The triangle of land, animal, and man is kept in a precarious balance by the seasonal orbit of man and animals over the land, or by simply following the rainfall and grass. Perhaps some people argue that the above picture, which includes an obsolete tribal structure also, is something of the past, but these people cannot deny that pastoralism is as such the most efficient way of carrying on an industry of sheep-breeding in arid countries, where this form of life occurs.

In many countries of the Middle East sedentarisation of tribes and the lack of development of any national line of meat and dairy industry would mean an approach to animal husbandry without considering the tribes. This is doomed to failure from the very beginning, since for these countries an animal producing industry apart from the tribes would require the founding of a completely new and revolutionary industry. This is also due to an intricate system of division of work, in respect of different aspects of livestock production in which rural and urban producers are also dependent upon tribal production. In addition, the pattern of tribal pastoral nomadism is more deeply woven into the culture of these countries than any planner could envisage, and could not be reformed within the period of one or two national plans.

The Iranian National Census of 1966 shows an increase of 11 thousand villages (2). Though there have been differences in methodology in collecting data in the two censuses, nevertheless all the 11,000 villages cannot be attributed to the differences of methodology, and the Iranian Central

Organization of Statistics cannot deny that because of self-settling tribes new villages are flourishing at an astonishing rate (3). If we take into consideration the fact that the phenomenon of increasing villages is happening at the same time as we are experiencing an increase in the urban-rural population ratio of 13%, (4) then the significance of tribal self-settlement becomes more pronounced.

This trend, that is the self-settlement of tribes would continue in the future and with much probability the number of nomads would continue to decrease even though the improvements in their health conditions might cause a rise in their fertility rate.

Thus the twentieth century's attitude, which has considered nomadism as an anomaly against the development of nationalism has caused it to become the most undesirable form of socio-political aggregation of human beings, (with the exception of some positive attitude prevailing among nomads themselves). Such famous dictums as that of Sir Arnold Toynbee's who considered nomadism as a form of "arrested civilization" have only aggravated the situation.

Outdated pre-occupation of so many governments with inducing settlement among already settling nomads is a waste of time and funds. It indirectly causes reaction, drawbacks, and consequent prolongation of nomadism on a negative basis and among those who have reached the verge of giving up a wandering way of life for good.

Besides, as it has been mentioned before, inducing settlement among tribes is no longer the real issue, but how to prevent unplanned wholesale settlement, or how to catch up with helping self-settling tribes with guidance plans or such plans as to make the process less painful or more fruitful to the population and the country involved, is of more importance.

There is of course a conflicting aspect to the same problem. Whereas the liberal approach has always resisted the idea of having nomads abandon their way of life in favour of nationalistic integration, it has neither come out with any solution to show how a conventional modern society could deal with its eventual nomadic minority.

It is also true that nobody seems to find it acceptable (with the exception of central national authorities) to follow an open policy of prescribing sedentarization for nomadic populations. Neither has anybody come out to suggest the continuation of nomadic life for its own sake and merits.

More revealing is the fact that among even the most stubborn opposition to tribal sedentarization none has ever suggested the exploration of possibilities for improving or developing

postoral nomadism as a positive contribution to the economic and social life of national or regional societies.

Perhaps time has come for people like social scientists, planners, politicians and policy makers to change their own attitude with respect to nomads and to examine the strange possibility that this might be the solution to nomads' problems. Indeed the old notion of "nomadism versus nationalism" should be abandoned in favor of more positive and productive approach by those who are responsible for the future course of development.

Notes.

- (1) Haraldson S.S.R. "Health Problems of Nomads"
W.H.O. Pub. April 1973 p. 52.
- (2) Iranian National Census 1966 Plan Organization, Tehran.
- (3) An estimated increase of two village per day is
calculated by the writer.
- (4) Fifth Development Plan, sector on the development of
the Agricultural sector. Plan Organization, Tehran
October 1972.