CHAPTER 4
IRANIAN NATIONALISM

The growth of nationalism has been of great significance in the social and political history of modern Iran. Unlike its counterparts in other Third World countries, Iranian nationalism was not a response to imperialism or colonialism, as the country had not experienced direct foreign rule. It did not evolve on the question of denial of socio-political rights or demand for self-determination as in the case of various countries of Europe and Asia. The distinctive feature of Iranian nationalism was that it was sponsored, supported or, to an extent, initiated by the rulers. Again, unlike other countries where popular revolutions are the fulfilment of the national aspirations of the people, the Iranian experience of 1979 was not the triumph of nationalism; rather the nationalist group played only an insignificant role in it.

The genesis of nationalism in Iran can be traced back to the Tobacco crisis of 1892. The resentment against the British company that monopolized the production and sale of tobacco in Iran was the factor that unified different social and political elements in the society. However, the people became satisfied with the cancellation of the tobacco concession and the agitation did not transform itself into a large-scale movement. Nationalism as an ideology has its beginning during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi (1924-41). The Pahlavi rulers - Reza and his son Mohammad Reza - conceived and developed nationalism as an ideology for legitimizing their rule. By the end of the nineteenth century, the newly emerged Iranian intellectuals got familiarized themselves with European science, philosophy, culture and technology. The inspiration provided by western culture made them construct a western outlook of Iran that considered Islam and the Arabs as the major cause for the country’s underdevelopment and weakness. Islam was treated to be non-
Iranian and an obstacle in the way of modernization and westernization of the country. They wanted to replace Islam with a glorified pre-Islamic Iran and Zoroastrianism, the official religion of Iran before the advent of Islam (Fazeli 2006:13). They wrote many books and journals with account of Iran's ancient cultural splendours and lamented that the Arabs had damaged them and obliterated the legacies of those glories. They viewed the Arabs as alien conquerors who desecrated Iranian civilization and destroyed the cultural glory of Iran. The only solution they suggested for regaining the splendour of the country was to bypass the Islamic heritage and sanctify the pre-Islamic symbols in the country's past. The new intellectuals undertook this mission and tried to popularize Achaemenian and Sasanian cultural achievements, literature, classics, architecture and military exploits, and also revived pre-Islamic national festivals like Nouruz, Chahar Shanbeh Suri and Sizdah Bedar (Fazeli 2006:33). Mirza Aga Khan Kirmani, Sadeq Hedayat and Ahmad Kasravi were the propagators of this new ideology.

When Reza Shah ascended to the throne of the country, he picked up pre-Islamic Iranian culture, and made it the foundation of his anti-clerical monarchism (Keddie 1972:178). Influenced and inspired by Ataturk of Turkey, Reza Shah tried to make Iran a developed and modernized secular state. Nationalism and secularism were the two principles he put great emphasis on. He regarded Islam and the influence of the clergy as the obstacles in the way of modernization and development of the country. Hence, contempt of the credentials of the Islamic religion became the distinguishing mark of the government policy. Thus, when he constructed the nationalist creed, he focused on exclusion of Islam from its core, and nationalism went hand in hand with secularism.

Reza Shah found education as the most potent force for the country's cohesion as a nation, “a force capable of blunting supranational loyalties
to Islam and blurring sub-national ethnic and local loyalties” (Menashri 1992:94). The Ministry of Education was entrusted to take the task of constructing and popularizing nationalism. The preparations of history textbooks were given special attention. The Commission entrusted to prepare textbooks, periodized history curriculum to three parts: ancient, medieval and modern. The ancient was the pre-Islamic age, which was pictured as the 'golden age' in which the nation had its greatest political victories and cultural glories. The medieval period, from the Islamic conquest to the period of Mongol invasion was the Dark Age, in which the foreign conquests extinguished the greatness of the country. The modern period represented the renaissance of that lost glory and authenticity (Marashi 2008:98-100). Along with the Commission on Education, the Ministry of Public Enlightenment was established “to organize and present lectures, festivals ceremonies and other public events for the education of the masses” (Marashi 2008:104). The Ministry arranged public lectures and events, emphasizing the efficacy of nationalism and monarchism. Commemoration of the memories of classical personalities like Hafez, Sa'di', Omar Khayyam and Ferdowsi also were held. Their mausoleums were constructed under state sponsorship and they were given wide publicity (Marashi 2008:113).

Reza Shah's ascendancy to the throne of Iran was a turning point in the development of nationalism. He accepted Pahlavi, the name of an ancient dialect in pre-Islamic period, as his family name and thus emphasized his affinity to the pre-Islamic past. He took various measures to exclude Islam from the national culture. As Abrahamian pointed out, in the midst of the anti-British nationalist fervor, Reza Shah offered three things for the solution of the backwardness of the country- purification of Persian language from foreign words, especially Arabic; the revival of Zoroastrianism as the official religion of the country; and the re-establishment of a strong state on the model of the Sasanian empire (Abrahamian 1982b:114). He took various measures
to purify Persian from Arabic, and committees were appointed to coin new words instead of the foreign terms. As a result, by 1932 around three thousand new words were added to the language (Kia 1988:20).

Reza Shah's attempt to place Zoroastrianism as the official religion is the clear evidence to his disgust towards Islam. Though it was professed by a minority of the population of the country, he considered it as the symbol of ancient glory. By the end of 1920s leniency was visible towards Zoroastrianism, equating it with the generative force of ancient Iran and attributing Iran's decline to the elimination of this force (Abdi 2001:63). Though the Shah or his family themselves never embraced Zoroastrianism, he projected it as the pride of Iranian nation. Naturally, Islam and Shi’i ulama became hostile to him. However, the ultimate objective of Reza Shah in highlighting nationalism was his authoritarian, despotic and autocratic rule and to provide a political legitimacy for his dynasty (Fazeli 2006:47). Lack of heredity and claim of descent of a royal family as in the case of Qajars or absence of religious descent as claimed by the Safavids, prompted Reza Shah to find a new factor for the legitimation of his rule. He found nationalism as the most appropriate ideology for this end. Mahmud Davari finds two reasons for Reza Shah’s support for nationalism based on pre-Islamic past: firstly, sanctity was conferred upon the monarchy as an institution deeply rooted in Iran’s history with themselves as the legal and legitimate heirs to the throne; secondly, the Arab invasion was presented as the ultimate cause for the downfall of the magnificent Persian civilization and consequently was responsible for lack of progress and social problems, characteristic of the present Persian society (Davari 2005:56). This is why he condemned Islam and the ulama and identified himself with the pre-Islamic past of the country.

Mohammed Reza Shah followed his father’s policy and also highlighted nationalism and related ideas to legitimize his despotic monarchy.
He continued the nurturing of the modernization programme of his father which centred on cultural institutions such as education, mass media, reform of the legal system and family law, in a secularized and westernized order, contrary to the traditional Islamic system. He adopted a new ideology that was a combination of western cultural values with a romantic view of ancient, pre-Islamic Persian civilization (Fazeli 2006:79). Assertion of the racial affinity of Iranians to Aryans was the most important factor of his nationalism. In his view, the Iranian culture is more akin to that of the west, than either to that of the Chinese or the Arabs. Iran was the early home of the Aryans from whom most Americans and Europeans are descended (Pahlavi 1961:18). Thus, he was echoing the Aryan superiority theory of the orientalists, by disregarding the sentiments of the Muslims who constitute more than ninety-five percent of the population. His acceptance of the title Aryamehr (the light of the Aryans), the change of Hijra calendar to the solar calendar beginning from the rule of Cyrus and the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of Persian monarchy in 1971 are the events which defined the nature of his new nationalist ideology. All these were intended to minimize the importance of Islam in the cultural fabric of the country, because in his view the Arab conquest had humiliated and destroyed the rich Iranian civilization in 641 A.D. As a result of the defeat of the Iranians, “the Zoroastrian religion died out but Persian culture triumphed” (Pahlavi 1961:23). Thus, he envisioned a Persian culture different and free from Islamic culture. In his view, Iranian and Islamic cultures are different and antagonistic. Mohammed Reza Shah deliberately avoided the term ‘Muslims’ and called the conquerors 'Arabs' when he described the Muslim conquest of Iran. By using the term 'Arabs' he was kindling the racial sentiments of Iranians who considered themselves the superior race in the world, in contrast to the barbarian and nomadic Arabs.

In short, the nationalism propounded by Pahlavi Shahs glorified
Iranian nation and culture based on the pre-Islamic past. In their view the advent of Islamic religion was an eclipse in the splendid and magnificent Iranian civilization. Hence, to regain the glory and significance of the cultural feats of the country, Islam should be wiped out, or at least relegated to the background. But according to the ulama and the Muslim intellectuals, Islam is interwoven with Iranian culture, and their separation is impossible. In their view, the Shahs oppose Islam because they know that Islam is the only ideology in the country that can restrict and check their despotic and authoritarian rule. It is in this background that Mutahhari analyzes nationalism and various components of its structure. After a comprehensive analysis of the ideology, he concludes that Islam is not alien to Iranian culture and both have rendered certain reciprocal services. He also proves the nonsensicality of nationalism as an ideology and advocates that the principle should be restructured on the basis of new perspectives.

Re-appraisal of Nationalism

When it is mentioned that Mutahhari opposed nationalism it does not mean that he is against the very idea of nationalism. What he criticizes is the western outlook of the creed and the elements and the factors for its evolution as argued by the European scholars. He writes,

[N]ationalism should not be entirely condemned, if it has only the positive side, that is if it increases the unity, good relationship, goodness and service to the people that we live together with…. Nationalism will be condemned by reason only when it has a negative side, which divides between individuals under the title of different nations, brings hostility between them and not respecting the rights of others (Mutahhari 1359/1980:44-45).

This is the view that Khomeini also shares. Khomeini also objects nationalism
as a secular ideology based on the assertion of a nation's separateness or even superiority over others or making it the only source of legitimacy and focus of allegiance (Hunter 1988:735). In his view, if nationalism means love of one's nation and the willingness to defend its borders it is allowed in Islam. He says, "[T]o love of one's fatherland and its people and to protect its frontiers are both unobjectionable, but nationalism involving hostility to other nations, is something quite different" (Khomeini 1981:302).

Mutahhari believes in the relevance of nationalism for Iran, a country that has never been occupied or attacked by any foreign power. In his view, the significance of national consciousness lies in the fact that a universal single political entity is impractical in the world. History shows that the human world has been divided into many groups and classes, each following a distinct path, and, therefore, the possibility of a single political grouping does not exist. "As long as there exist wolves and sheep in the world," says Mutahhari, "there is no possibility of any unity between them" (Mutahhari 1359/1980:19). At the same time, he questions the western notion that nationalism is constructed or evolved on the basis of certain common factors. Generally, common culture and traditions, common language, and common racial background are considered the factors for national consciousness. He examines each factor in depth and concludes that they are meaningless and absurd. Very often, the factors in different situations produce different results. As he has pointed out, a deeper understanding of the nature of humans indicates that these factors do not play a basic and vital role in forming the collective consciousness of nationalism, and are incapable of serving as a permanent cementing force among the members of a nation (Mutahhari 1359/1980:12-15). Considering language, he says that it is not a basic element for national consciousness, but a product of nationhood (Mutahhari 1359/1980:13). In the case of the countries where nationalism emerged in the nineteenth century, none of those had a common language at the early stages
of their genesis. It was only after they had come together and emotionally attached to each other in a particular territory that they developed a common language in the course of their progress (Mutahhari 1359/1980:13). This is what Ahmad Naqavi points out in his analysis of significance of nationalism in Islam. He says that language is not the principal factor in shaping nationality, even if it speeds the process. He illustrates the example of America and England that had the same language in Washington's time, but segregated each other, and Switzerland had three different languages and India more than fourteen languages, yet they were not barriers for national unity (Naqavi 1984:57).

In the case of racial factor, Mutahhari rules out its role as an element for generating collective consciousness in the people of a nation. He illustrates the example of the evolution of the Islamic community in its early century to prove the meaninglessness of racial factor. The pre-Islamic Arabs had all the vices of prejudice, disputes, tribal wars and superstitions. But after embracing Islam and being infused with its morality, monotheistic spirit and the social justice, they acquired the qualities a civilized society. But after some time, their old racial prejudices started to rise once again, and it happened because of their neglecting the conditions of moral and social customs of Islamic monotheism. Furthermore, he says that treating racial and blood factor as bond for national unity is superstitious, because through the mingling of human beings race has become an illusion. He says that "[I]f we the Iranians want to judge on the basis of race and only accept someone to be an Iranian, if he has the Aryan race, then we must consider most Iranian not to be Iranian and give up many of our great men…." (Mutahhari 1359/1980:43). This is exactly what Naqavi points out. According to him, the racial root cannot be proved logically and scientifically. The blood of one race has blended with that of other races. It is impossible to ascertain one's race, whether he is Aryan or Semitic or something else (Naqavi 1984:59-60). This
indicates that the racial traits do not have a permanent and unchangeable reality; rather their role and effect can be changed under other social and moral conditions.

Regarding common traditions and customs, Mutahhari believed that they are the products of national consciousness, rather than being its base and source. The traditions and norms are the results of the voluntary and conscious activities of the ancestors. If it were not for the relationship or connections between past and present generations, these customs would not have transferred from generation to generation. Unless there is consciousness of unity, tradition and culture cannot be inherited by succeeding generations (Mutahhari 1359/1980:14). Thus, unity is the prelude for common culture, not vice versa. He finds that common language, race and cultural traditions are not the constituents of national consciousness. They can work as factors for unity; but what he argues is they are not the vital factors. Naqavi underlines the arguments of Mutahhari that the so-called common factors for unity are irrational and illogical (Naqavi 1984:55-61).

These factors also do not work as barriers in the way of developing unity among the people. They are not essential, but accidental. They play only transitory role in the birth of national awareness, and are not of permanent significance. He elaborates the point thus:

the people who once fought together against foreigners for independence and self-respect were, after reaching this goal, divided themselves into rulers and the ruled, into privileged and underprivileged, in accordance with their expectations, claims, interests and objectives. Accordingly, the national fight against foreign supremacy is changed into an internal class struggle. The people sharing a common culture, language and race
become separated and wage war against one another (Mutahhari 1359/1980:19).

Thus, it is perceived that the classical criteria for the birth of nationalism are not applicable to many situations in the world. Similar situations have created unity in some countries and disunity in some other countries. Here Mutahhari deconstructs the idea of western concept of nationalism and reveals its absurdity as an ideology. If these are not the elements of unity of collective consciousness and nationalism, then there arises a question, what are the factors for creating unity?

Mutahhari described it as “the experience of common sufferings, the common anguish arising from the oppression and encroachments of imperialism”. He says,

[A] collective consciousness, a sense of nationhood or nationalism, is born among a group of people when they are possessed by a sense of common agony combined with a common aspiration. The common aspiration will lead them to build collective ideal, for attaining it they will start endeavouring, fighting and struggling and suffer pain and deprivation. This aspiration further strengthens their collective awareness at later stages, integrates them emotionally and ultimately results in the nation's unification (Mutahhari 1359/1980:21).

Then, how the common sufferings and aspiration works as the bond for unity? He writes,

[I]t is in the hard times, afflictions, privations and struggles for changing his situation that man's true nature is revealed to him; then he comes upon his real identity and realizes the
significance of exalted human values and virtues. When a man faces oppression, infidelity, absolutism and corruption and suffers from them, then only is the love of justice and truth awakened in the depth of his being. These are the uniting factors and they have the quality of uniting people (Mutahhari 1359/1980:21).

That is, the common sufferings and deprivations, experiences of oppression, tyranny and corruption give the people an opportunity to conceive the human values and virtues in them. This is an occasion of the awakening of truth, love and justice in them. Thus along with common sufferings, a yearning and love for justice, truth, righteousness and piety work in bringing out nationalism. When the essence of these principles is injected into the people, it stimulates them to have a collective movement resulting into nationalism. The sufferings, the degree of their consciousness of their deprivation, the intensity of the aspirations awakened by them, and their ultimate objective, prepare the foundations and spirit of nationalism (Mutahhari 1359/1980:22-23).

Mutahhari gives a definite and practical shape to his ideology of unity—unity based on tawhid or monotheism. This is not the national unity according to the western criteria but something based on faith and belief. It is not nationalism in the modern sense, it is kind of internationalism or universal unity. He cites the example of the Islamic nation or the Islamic cosmopolitan society established by the Prophet in Madina in the Seventh Century to illustrate his argument. The Muslims set aside their racial, linguistic, cultural, social and economic differences and became part and parcel of a nation which was established on the basis of tawhid (Mutahhari 1359/1980:24). Faith was the only factor that united the people of various cultures, tribes and territories into a single political entity. Mutahhari says that "before the advent of Islam the people were enemies of one another but after the spirit of Islam and
tawhid were infused into them, they were united together" (Mutahhari 1359/1980:25). Beheshti, a scholar and leader of the Islamic Revolution, also considers faith or tawhid as the factor of unity among the people (Beheshti 1986:17). Modern scholar Naqavi also treated it as the unifier of the people, irrespective of race, colour, territory and cultural traditions (Naqavi 1992:52, 77). Hence, tawhid is the element that can unite the peoples of different racial, cultural and linguistic groups, and if that principle is ignored or not given due importance, the unity will decline. That is happened in the case of Islamic societies in the first century of Hijra. The unity disappeared and divisions emerged within the Islamic state because “the men who wielded power could not or did not wish to understand the real meaning of Islamic teachings” (Mutahhari 1359/1980:27). According to Mutahhari, this ignorance or neglect was the cause for the decline of Islamic state.

In short, Mutahhari advances a political unification on the basis of tawhid, and he denounces unity on the basis of common material factors. In his view, common suffering and aspiration for justice and righteousness can bring unity among the people, and thus being conscious, they should establish a cosmopolitan society on the basis of faith.

**Islam and Iranian Nationalism**

The compatibility between Islam and Iranian nationalism is an important subject Mutahhari deals with. During the Pahlavi period, it was widely believed that Islam and Iranian nation are on opposite poles, and the former was responsible for the degeneration and humiliation of the Iranian civilization in the ancient period. It was the ground on which the Pahlavi rulers glorified Iranian culture and raised the issue of Iranian nationalism by denigrating the credentials of Islam. The intellectuals of that period, who were influenced by western culture and education, echoed this propaganda and they began to malign Islam. It was in this background Mutahhari discusses the
Iranian nationalism and Islam in Iran and argues that both are not incompatible but complementary to each other, and both have rendered certain mutual services which were beneficial to both.

The wars of Qadisiya in 636 A.D and Nahavand in 641 A.D were significant in the history of Iran that after then the whole of Iran became under the control of the Arabs and the Sasanian rule came to end. Different arguments are raised about the subjugation of the Sasanians. European historians and the Iranian nationalists hold the belief that this was an invasion of the Arabs on Iran which was ruled by the Sasanian dynasty, and hence a matter of humiliation to all Iranians. By this invasion, the Arabs destroyed the rich Iranian civilization and forced them to convert to Islam. However, the Iranians expressed their protest and disgust to the Arabs and their ideology (Haas 1946:76, 82-83). This is the crux of the belief the Europeans and the nationalists hold alike.

Mutahhari challenges the arguments of these scholars and argues that the defeat of the Iranians by the Arabs were a natural outcome of the socio-political situations of that time. From the viewpoint of numerical strength of the armed forces, arms and from the viewpoint of food supplies, art, strategy and tactics of war, the Iranians were far superior to the Arabs. Yet they were defeated in the battle, because the religious zeal, willpower and desire for relieving people from the shackles of oppression and polytheism were quiet apparent in the Arab army (Mutahhari 1359/1980:76). At the same time, the Iranian army was in a slumber, and though well equipped in arms and resources, lacked the necessary zeal and enthusiasm to confront the enemy. The roots of this indifference can be seen in the social and political decadence of the country created by the rulers. The Sasanian government became so unpopular that the people were discontent and alienated from it. Mutahhari lists the causes for the Arab victory as:
[A]ctually the most important factor in the defeat of the Sasanian empire should be traced to the discontent of the Iranian people with the tyrannical rule, the taxing and clumsy creed and customs of those days. All the Eastern and Western historians are in agreement that the government and the socio-religious institutions had become so deviant and corrupt to the extent that almost all the people were dissatisfied with them (Mutahhari 1359/1980:78)

The discontent and dissatisfaction among the people made indifference and disillusionment in them, and this is the reason why the people did not fight whole-heartedly against the Arabs.

The discontent was not due to political reasons only. The picture of social life was quite pitiable that the people suffered by a rigid stratified system and exploitation by the priestly class. The society was immobile, and the learning and teaching were restricted only to the aristocrats, feudal lords and the Zoroastrian priests. The common people had the huge burden of taxes to the government and various kinds of dues to the priests. All these factors made the people fed up with the existing system and became tired of it. It was at that juncture, the Arabs came to Iran with the message of justice, equality and righteousness. In fact, the advent of Islam was a boon to the Iranian masses, as they found the principles and messages of Islam as alleviating their miseries. The Zoroastrian priesthood was the most exploiting body in the society. Besides, fulfilling the religious functions, they intervened in the social and political aspects. They had the right to interpret, expound, scrutinize, annul and abrogate the civil laws of the country. As the influence of the Sasanian culture grew in strength their authority also increased gradually and they grabbed more and more power. Their influence became so strong that the people were compelled to make efforts to liberate themselves
from these hardships (Said Nafisi: *Tarikh-e Ijitmay-e Iran*, vol:2. P:20 quoted in Mutahhari 1359/1980:140). The influence of the priests was so strong that even the emperor had to adhere to the whims of the high priest. It was in such a society Islam reached and penetrated its principles of truth, justice and brotherhood. Mutahhari quotes Abd al Husayn Zarrinkub who writes that "[I]n such a world chained in the shackles of religious and ethnic prejudices, Islam breathed a new life by creating a world of Islam whose centre was the Quran, not Syria or Iraq, and eradicated all ethnic and racial prejudices by preaching a kind of internationalism" (Abd al Husayn Zarrinkub quoted in Mutahhari 1359/1980:127). Thus, Islam provided them a new lease of life that freed them from oppression, discrimination and exploitation. Mutahhari quotes,

"[T]he Islamic triumph was actually the victory of justice and piety over oppression and destructiveness. The basic factor of the victory was not the Arabs, rather it was the oppressed masses of the conquered lands who thirsted for truth and justice and who rose in revolt with the torch of heavenly message against the satanic power ruling over their societies (Zainal Abidin Rahnama quoted in Mutahhari 1359/1980:126)."

The views expressed by modern scholars support this observation. Elton L. Daniel and Richard Frye point out that before the Islamic conquest, the Sasanian empire was defeated by Byzantine emperor several times, and these defeats created many social and political troubles. The internal rebellions and the aristocracy’s refusal to assist the emperor added fuel to the fire. It created a period of anarchy in the country and the Arabs used this opportunity to invade the country (Daniel 2008:71-72, Frye 1962:235). They hold the view that it was the weakening of the central power and the subsequent social and political troubles that made the country vulnerable to Arab conquest. The
rigid stratified social system and the rise in taxes made the people discontented and they became fed up with the existing system (Frye 1962:235). Now the people were ready to welcome any power that would deliver them from these troubles. Naturally, when Arabs invaded the country, they did not put up major resistance.

In short, the Islamic conquest did not humiliate the Iranians in any sense; rather it delivered them from the tyranny, injustice and exploitation of the Sasanian rulers and the Zoroastrian priests. About the allegation that Islam came with sword, Mutahhari replies:

[Y]es, it was the sword, but what kind of sword was it and what did Islam do with it? The sword of Islam shattered the satanic forces, removed the evil shadow of the mu'bads [the Zorastrian priests], broke with it the chains of about one hundred and forty million people and emancipated the oppressed masses from slavery. The sword of Islam always struck at the heads of tyrants for the benefit of the oppressed and cut off the hands of tyrannical exploiters. It always served the cause of the oppressed and weak sections of humanity (Mutahhari 1359/1980:277-78).

Among the scholars, it is widely believed that the Iranians accepted Shi’ism as a protest against the Arab conquest, who professed Sunni Islam. Shi’ism has been depicted as a guise for Iranians to preserve their old beliefs and customs. It is termed as a reaction against the domination of the Arabs over the Iranian nation and as a symbol of Iranian nationalism. Mohammed Reza Shah Pahlavi writes: "[E]ven in their religion the Persians did not completely surrender. For patriotic as well as religious reasons they gradually adopted a new branch of the Moslem faith known as Shi’ism, as distinguished from the Sunnism practiced by most of the Arabs (Pahlavi 1961:23).
There was another reason for relating Shi’ism with Iran: Hosein, the second Shi’i Imam, was believed to have married Shaharbanu, the daughter of Yezdgerd III, the last Sasanian King, hence the remaining Imams are descended from Prophet Mohammed and the House of Sasan (Browne 1929:130). The issue of Hosein’s marriage and attribution of Imams to his lineage to the Sasanian dynasty provided an excuse to explain the Iranians’ inclination towards the Household of the Prophet, and to interpret the Shi’i belief in the divine right of the Imams as a remnant of the ancient Iranian belief in the Divine origin of the sovereignty of the Sasanian emperors (Mutahhari 1359/1980:100). Mutahhari questions the validity of these statements and proclaims that they are baseless and untrue. He is of the opinion that the Arabs never compelled the Iranians to give up their religion and did not exert pressure on them to accept Islam. Rather they embraced Islam voluntarily, and gradually. He points out that, it seems impossible that a small number of the Arabs - a few thousands - could have forced a nation of several million people to disown its faith and creed, especially when both the sides were equipped with the same kind of weapons or arms, or rather, when the Iranians were better equipped in this regard (Mutahhari 1359/1980:105). Modern scholars also share the views of Mutahhari. Edward Browne believes that the Iranian's conversion was peaceful and voluntary (Browne 1929:207). Richard Frye explains that at first the Arabs made separate treaties with each town or district of Iran after their conquest and they were eager to get tribute from the people rather than their conversion (Frye 1962:242). Since they did not compel their religion on the defeated, the Iranian's conversion was slow and gradual (Frye 1962:241). Elton Daniel holds the view that the process of conversion was the result of individual choices for pragmatic reasons. Many embraced the new faith in order to avoid paying the poll tax (Daniel 2008:72).

Mutahhari answers all the arguments raised to defend the Iranian colour to Shi’ism and explains that the reasons for prevalence of the creed in
Iran is not the hatred to Islam, but certain other factors worked for it. He put seven arguments to reveal his stand on the controversy.

Firstly, the Iranian conversion to Islam was not forced, but voluntary (Mutahhari 1359/1980:103-07). Secondly, he asks, when Yezdgerd, the last Sasanian King lost the throne, and had to flee from one place to another seeking refuge, why did the people not give him refuge? How can one explain the view that such a people attach themselves to the members of the Household of the Prophet just for the sake of their link with (by marriage) to him? (Mutahhari 1359/1980:107-108). Thirdly, if it is accepted that Shi’ism was a veil of Iranians to hide their sentiments, why didn't they throw out this veil even two centuries after attaining independence? (Mutahhari 1359/1980:108). During the Abbasid caliphate they had the opportunity and freedom to abandon Islam and go back to their old culture. But they not only did not reject Islam, but strengthened its culture and civilization in various spheres. Fourthly, Shaharbanu, the daughter of Yazdgerd III and the wife of Imam Hosein, was not held in greater respect than the mother of other Imams, some of whom were Arab and some of African origin (Mutahhari 1359/1980:108).

Fifthly, Shaharbanu's marriage with Imam Hosein is of doubtful authenticity. Browne, Christenson and Said Nafisi, the leading scholars on Iran, consider this incident as fictitious and fabrication. The only reference of the marriage is in a hadith in *al Kafi*, but two narrators in the chain of the narrators of this hadith are fabricators of hadith (Mutahhari 1359/1980:108-109). Sixthly, If Iranians held the *Imams* of Household of the prophet in respect due to their relationship with the Sasanian dynasty; they should have paid respect to Umayyads also, because one of the grand daughters of Yezdgerd was married to Walid bin Abd'l Malik, the Umayyad monarch. But Iranians hated the Umayyads (Mutahhari 1359/1980:109-110). Lastly, the
view could be accepted in case the Shi’i faith was confined only to Iranians or Iranians had been the first group to be Shi’i. But the fact is that neither the first Shi’is were Iranians, nor was the majority of Iranians got converted to Shi’ism (Mutahhari 1359/1980:110).

On the ground of these seven arguments, Mutahhari argues that Shi’ism was not the Iranian reaction to Arab conquest or the guise to hide their old beliefs and customs. Keddie observes that if one studies the Iranian history, one can easily ascertain that Shi’ism is not especially Iranian, although it contains Iranian elements. Before 1500 AD there were many more Sh’ii movements and a state outside Iran, and Iran was far more often ruled by Sunnis (Keddie 1980b:89). She also believes that Shi’ism is not the product of Iranians’ hatred to the Arabs. Hamid Algar also rejects the argument of Shi’ism as an Iranian response to 'Arab Islam'. At the time of its origin, Shi’ism was a total stranger to Iran. According to him, it was in the aftermath of the Mongol conquest in thirteenth century, when the authority of the Abbasid caliphate was destroyed, a gradual increase in the influence of Shi’ism began to be noticed in Iran (Algar 1983:13). It was only from sixteenth century onwards that majority of Iranians became Shi’i and Shi’ism was recognized the official religion of the country. It was not because of any hatred to Arab Islam, but two external factors were responsible for it: the rise of the Safavid dynasty in 1502 which claimed descent from Musa al-Kazim, one of the Shi’i Imams and secondly, the influx to Iran of Shi’i Arab scholars from traditional centres of Shi’ism in the Arab world (Algar 1983:13-14).

Then, if the hatred to Arab Islam is not the cause for its rise, why Iranians accepted Shi’ism? Mutahhari gives the answer that:

What attracted the Iranians’ thirsting spirit for Islam more than any other thing was the Islamic message of justice and equality. They had been deprived of these for centuries, and awaited such
a message. The Iranians observed that the only group of Muslims that was free of prejudice and very keen to establish justice and equality in society and showed an unlimited sensitivity in regard to these values was the Household of the Prophet (Mutahhari 1359/1980:112).

Thus, it may be concluded that Iranians accepted Shi’ism not because of any external compulsion, but they found that it is the most appropriate to their tastes and interests to redress their grievances and problems. Keddie supports this argument that the conversion of Iranians to Islam meant that “they followed a more egalitarian and less priest-ridden religion” (Keddie 1980b:93).

Another argument made by Iranian intellectuals and European scholars to propound forcible conversion of Iranians to Islam is, the Iranians' preservation of their indigenous language, Persian, and refusal of it to be eliminated and replaced by the Arabic language. Mutahhari rules out this argument as untrue and baseless. He says that Islam does not make it obligatory upon a people to give up their own language and adopt Arabic as their means of expression. The people have the privilege to respect their mother language and Arabic is the language of their faith. Language and religion are not inseparable, and one need not sacrifice one for the other (Mutahhari 1359/1980:93). "If the revival of Persian was aimed at combating Islam", he asks, "what was the reason for the Iranians’ interest and sincere efforts in compiling and reviving the study of Arabic etymology, grammar syntax, morphology, figures of speech, rules of eloquence and rhetoric"? (Mutahhari 1359/1980:90). It is a fact that after the Islamisation of Iran there was a great revolution in the literature, arts and culture of Iran. The Persian and Arabic languages were reformed and enriched, new books in both languages were written, and there was a real literary revolution. Iranian
scholars contributed much to the development of Arabic and Arabic language provided new vocabulary, terms and richness to Persian. The European scholars look to only one side of the picture, see the revival of Persian, and ignore the development of Arabic. Mutahhari says that the revival of Persian was not a sign of resistance to Islam, rather it was contributory to Islam (Mutahhari 1359/1980:93). He even went to the extent of saying that the Arabs, not the Iranians, were responsible for the development of Persian language. He says, 

the Abbasids, themselves Arab and of Arab stock, were more active in promoting Persian than Iranians. The reason was that in their fight against Umayyads, who pursued a policy that favoured Arabs to non-Arabs adopted an anti Arab political line…. The Abbasids… opposed all elements that supported the Arab domination over non-Arabs and promoted the non-Arab elements with a view to weaken the hold of Arabs on other nationalities. With this aim in view, they promoted Persian and even opposed the Arabic language (Mutahhari 1359/1980:93)

Thus, it is an undisputable fact that at that time Persian was not considered the symbol of Iranian nationalism and it was not hostile to Islam or Arabic. On the other side, Arabs made immense contributions to Persian and they incorporated it into the multi-lingual facet of Islam. Really, Islam engaged in the 'give and take' policy between Arabic and Persian. European scholars like Richard Frye, also refers to these reciprocal services (Frye 1965:252-55).

**Book Burnings in Iran and Egypt**

There is an issue in Iranian history which has been used by the Iranian intellectuals, nationalists and the European scholars to rouse the national
sentiments among the people in a way the Iranians denounce Islam - the book burnings in Iran and Egypt. Mutahhari wrote a book *Kitab Sozi dar Iran va Misr* to refute the arguments of the proponents of this issue and tried to prove that the incident is baseless and fictitious.

The crux of the issue of book burning in Iran is that: 'a large academy named *Gundi Shahpur*, which may be compared to a modern university, was established in the Iranian capital *Shush* by the Sasanian king Khusro. This institution flourished for a long period until it was invaded and destroyed by the Arabs, during the Islamic conquest of Iran. In Alexandria, in Egypt, the governor of Caliph Umar, Amr bin al A's, destroyed the magnificent library because of the Islamic stand against the non-Islamic learning (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:208,237). Whenever the book burning of *Gundi Shahpur* was mentioned, the destruction of the Alexandria library also was added, because if it were proved that the Arabs burnt the library of Alexandria, it would indicate that they could also have burnt down libraries anywhere that they found them. Hence, it is probable that the library in Iran suffered a similar fate at their hands (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:217). Thus, the book burnings of *Gundi Shapur* and Alexandria are used to malign Islam and to establish that Islamic attitude was against learning and intellectual freedom, and the bigotry and chauvinism of the Arabs prompted them to destroy the symbol of Iranian culture, as they did in Alexandria. Mutahhari analyzes the issue in detail, and arrives to the conclusion that these are mere allegations based on false and baseless arguments.

At first, before making a detailed examination, Mutahhari notices that the academy of *Gundi Shahpur* which was largely a medical centre, continued to flourish till the 9th and 10th century A.D, even two centuries after the Arab conquest of Iran. It was after the establishment of the academy at Baghdad, that the importance of the *Gundi Shahpur* was overshadowed and it gradually
disappeared. Hence, the claim that the Arabs destroyed *Gundi shahpur* is based on total ignorance of facts (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:209). He also points out that the storytellers of the book burning of *Gundi Shapur* do not mention the location of the library (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:210). Though the details of Muslim conquests of Iran and Rome are available, no historical document is available to prove the destruction of this library. Mutahhari acknowledges the fact that in the period following the Islamic conquest, there was decline in learning and literature. Many of the books of this period vanished, but not due to any book burning or some incident of this kind. It happened, rather, in the natural and normal course, for whenever there is a change in people’s ideas and beliefs and a culture overwhelms another, the old culture is neglected and the literary and scientific heritage of the old culture gradually perishes due to the people’s neglect and their lack of interest (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:213). This is what happened in Iran. When the Sasanian society accepted Islam and imbibed its social and cultural values, they ignored their former culture and paid little attention to its literary and cultural aspects. Naturally, they went into oblivion. Mutahhari comments on it that, following the Iranians’ conversion to Islam and the prevalence of the Arabic script and the falling of the Pahlavi script into disuse, the old books became unusable for the majority of people and gradually disappeared (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:214). In *Kitab sozi dar Iran va Misr*, he cites the arguments of the proponents of the book burning theory, and he replies them logically.

The first argument is that Sir John Malcolm has referred to the incident of burning of library in his history book. Mutahhari views that Malcolm lived in 19th century A.D and his statements concerning an incident that took place thirteen centuries earlier cannot be accepted as reliable historical evidence (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:219). Secondly, the advocates of book burning argue that during the pre-Islamic period the Arabs were illiterate. The implication is that the Muslims were illiterate and an illiterate community will naturally
despise learning and books. But Mutahhari draws our attention to the literacy revolution that occurred in the period of a quarter century that elapsed between the pre-Islamic era and the conquest of Iran. Due to the campaign of the Prophet the Arabs became lovers of learning, books and acquisition of knowledge (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:222). It also negates the argument of book burning.

The third is an incident pertaining to al Jahiz, an Arab scholar, who writes that one day one of the chieftains of the Quraish saw a boy reading a book of Sibawayh, an Arab scholar. He shouted at the boy saying that what he is doing is the job of teachers and beggars. The intention is that the Quraish and the Arabs looked down upon literacy (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:216). Mutahhari replies that this contempt for teacher’s job was not due to hostility to learning, but because of the poor income being drawn from the teacher’s job (Mutahhari 1363b/1984: 223). The fourth evidence is that Abu Rayhan al Birdui writes that when Qutayba bin Muslim reconquered Khawarizm after the apostasy of its inhabitants he destroyed those who knew Khawarizm script and dispersed them in different parts of the world, and burned their books and writings. In other words, they were reduced to illiteracy (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:217). Mutahhari tackles the arguments that, firstly, Birdui’s report is about Khwarizm language not of Pahlavi language. Secondly, the probable sites of academic institutions of Iran does not include Khwarizm, it may be Tistun, Nahavand, Isfahan, Nishapur, Azerbaijan etc. Thirdly, the probable language in which the academic works might have existed was Pahlavi, and not Khwarizm (Mutahhari 1363b/1984: 224-26).

Fifthly, Abd Allah bin Tahir, an Iranian scholar, mentions that he had burnt books in Iran. Mutahhari says that Abd Alla bin Tahir was hostile to the Arabs. If it is accepted that he burned books, it should not be put in the account of the Arabs, and since Tahir was an Iranian, the blame should be put
on Iranians (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:228). The sixth argument is advanced by two scholars, George Zaydan and Dr. Dhahibullah Safa in their books, which says that Umar, the second Caliph, prevented the writing and compilation of books except the words of Allah- the Quran. This prohibition remained until the 8th century AD. The logic of this argument is that a community which does not permit themselves to engage in writing and compilation for at least one century, would not tolerate the existence of books belonging to the vanquished people (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:218). Mutahhari clarifies the doubt that Umar’s prohibition was related specifically to the writing of traditions of the Prophet and it pertained only to the Sunnis. The writing and compilation was not totally banned in all fields hence it is wrong to say that Umar prevented writing and compilation of all subjects (Mutahhari 1363b/1984: 230).

These six arguments and the replies given to them by Mutahhari establish that the burning of the library in Iran by the Muslim forces is fictitious and is based on wrong assumptions. According to him, the Muslims under Umar did not destroy any centre of learning in Iran; rather they encouraged learning and literacy wherever they reached.

He goes on the discussion to disarm the critics that the burning of Alexandrian library by the men of Amr bin al-As, the commander of the second Caliph Umar, is reported in history for the first time by a Christian, Abd al Latif al Baghdadi in thirteenth century A.D. In his history work on Egypt, while describing about a ‘tower’ known as Amud al Sawari, the previous site of the library of Alexandria, he writes that “It is said that this tower is one of the several on which was erected a theatre, where Aristotle used to lecture and which was an academy, and here stood the library of Alexandria which was burnt by Amr As at the Caliph’s order” (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:238). He continues that another scholar who reports the event is
Abul Faraj (b.1226 A.D), a Jewish physician, whose *Mukhtasar-al duwal* contains the description of the book burning in Alexandria. Faraj writes that after rejecting the request of Yahya al Nahawi, a former Christian and close companion of Amr bin al As, Amr dismantled the library and distributed the books among the public baths of Alexandria, which were used for fuel for bathrooms (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:247-48). The third scholar and the only historian who mentions the library burning is Ibn Khaldun who mentions the matter in his *Muqaddima* (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:260). Mutahhari analyses all these arguments and conclude that the burning of library is a baseless issue, and it was blaming a group of people for an incident perpetrated by another group three centuries earlier.

Mutahhari says that the style of the description by Abd al Latif indicates the incredibly of the incident. He starts the description by the term *yudhkaru* that means ‘it is said’ or ‘it is rumoured’ (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:238). If an event is reported in such a way, it indicates that the reporter himself is not sure of the credibility of what he narrates. If he were sure of authenticity, he should not have used such a term. Secondly, the city Alexandria was founded after Aristotle’s death and after Alexander’s invasion of Egypt. Hence, Aristotle’s lecture in the library’s theatre, which actually came into being after his death, is not conceivable. If a report consists of certain statements some of which are definitely false, it is indicative of the falsehood of its other parts also (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:239-40). Thirdly, by depending on Shibili Numani’s *Fat’h-e Iskendariyah*, he writes that Abd al Latif compiled his book at the end of the twelfth century and at the beginning of thirteenth century. It means that he lived six hundred years after the event that took place in 638 or 639 A.D. In the course of these six centuries no historian, Muslim, Christian or Jew has ever mentioned this incident (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:240).
Mutahhari quotes the views of Will Durant, the famous European historian, to refute the arguments of Abd al Latif. Durant rejects Latif’s report because, (1) a large part of library had been destroyed by the Christians under the Patriarch Theophilus in 392 A.D., about 250 years before the Muslim conquest of Alexandria; (2) the books that remained had suffered such hostility and neglect that most of the collection had disappeared by 642 A.D; and, (3) in the 500 years between the supposed event and its first reporter no Christian historian mentions it, though one of them, Eutychius, the Archbishop of Alexandria in 933 A.D. described the Arab conquest of Alexandria in detail (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:241-42). Gustav Lebon, another European scholar, writes that before the Islamic era, the Christians themselves burnt and destroyed the said library, so that by the time of the Muslim conquest, nothing of the collection of the library remained there (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:242).

About the argument of Abul Faraj, Mutahhari says that one cannot accept his argument because there is no reference to the source of this incident in his work, and secondly, he reports the incident six hundred years after the alleged event, without anyone else having reported it earlier (Mutahhari 1363b/1984: 249). Certain other reasons also make the report of al Faraj unacceptable as a historical fact. Firstly, the main character of the story, Yahya al Nahawi, had died about a hundred years before the conquest of Alexandria, and his meeting with Amr is a fiction (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:249). Secondly, the books distributed by Amr bin al-As made fuel for all the baths of Alexandria, around four thousand in number, for six months. This is irrational and illogical (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:250). Thirdly, as Shibili Numani and many western scholars have written, in those days books were made of parchment, which was not suitable for the purpose of fuel (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:252). Fourthly, if there had been such a library in Alexandria, Amr would have mentioned it in his report to the Caliph. In that
report he mentioned theatres, public places of amusement and groceries, but does not mention anything about library (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:253). Fifthly, Amr concluded dhimmī pact with the people of Alexandria and accordingly, the lives, properties, and honours of the Alexandrians were to be protected by the Islamic government. In the light of these facts, it is contrary to the general conduct and character of the Muslims to destroy a library (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:253-54). Sixthly, Amr was a man who was interested in reform, development and welfare of the people. Such a person could not have set fire to a library. Lastly, if Amr issued the order for the distribution of the books for the baths, how the people, the Christians and Jews, who consider it as part of their tradition and culture of Alexandria, accepted them and used as fuel (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:256). About the argument of Ibn Khaldun, Mutahhari says that he mentions the matter in passive voice with the words walaqad yudhkaru - and it has been said (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:260). This indicates that he was not sure about the incident. Secondly, the statements of Ibn Khaldun regarding to book burning are made in his Muqaddima, which is a philosophical and sociological work. Had he believed in its historical value he would have cited this story in the history part (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:262). Because of these reasons, Mutahhari views that Ibn Khaldun did not have belief in the historicity of the book burning in Alexandria.

After analyzing various views of the scholars, like Gustav Labon, Will Durant and Shibili Numani, Mutahhari concludes that the library in Alexandria was destroyed by the Christians long before the advent of Islam in Iran (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:262). The Christian belief that teaching of sciences and philosophy are against the tenets of the religion, and its attitude

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1 *Dhimmis* were non-Muslim subjects in the Islamic state who were under the protection of the government. They were entitled to pay a religious tax to the state known as *jizya*, exempted from military service which was compulsory for the Muslim subjects and were given protection for their lives and properties.
to scholars and philosophers as heathens and heretics, led to the devastation of the library. If the Muslims did not perpetrate the burning, then a question arises, why there is the propaganda that Muslims are responsible for the destruction of the library. Mutahhari supports the argument of Shibili Numani that the Christians are behind this propaganda, and their real motive was to hide their own guilt (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:266). But he considered it one of the reasons, the main one is imperialism. He says that:

"[P]olitical imperialism can succeed only when cultural imperialism has succeeded. The necessity for the success of cultural imperialism is to shake a people’s faith in their own culture and history. Imperialism has found out the truth and tested it that Islam is the source of the culture relied upon by Muslims and it is the ideology that they are proud of.... Hence, the Muslim masses are to be brainwashed so that they lose their faith and conviction in their ideology and culture, and are prepared to be moulded according to the Western pattern (Mutahhari 1363b/1984:266-67)."

Mutahhari believes that the book burnings in Iran and Egypt are attributed to Muslims because the European scholars want to discredit Islamic ideology and to distract Muslims from their religion. Only then, they can make them the admirers and supporters of the West.

"To sum up, Mutahhari considers nationalism as an ideology the West has devised in addressing their problems and this ideology was developed in France and other parts of Europe according to the needs and necessities of the territories where it took its origin. To apply such an ideology to the Eastern countries is irrational and impractical. In the East, it is being used to distract the people from their cultural past, and to attract them to the western culture and values. This will give the Westerners markets and consumers for their"
products. In Iran, the idea of humiliation of Iranians by the hands of Arabs, and book burnings in Iran and Egypt got wide currency due to the propaganda by the western intellectuals and the government. School text books at secondary and higher secondary levels contained lessons about these issues. The government of the Mohammad Reza Pahlavi used these to discredit the Shi’i ulama who were considered to be the potent force to challenge the legitimacy of his government. By investigating the truth of these issues, Mutahhari tried to clear the misunderstandings among the people and put Islam at the centre of Iranian culture. The core of his reply to these criticisms was that the people of Iran embraced Islam whole-heartedly and voluntarily. They hailed the coming of Islam as means of escape from oppressive state policies, especially deliverance from the rigid class system and authoritarian attitude of the Zoroastrian priests. It was because of this voluntary conversion to Islam that even after they got political independence from the Arabs under local dynasties, later, the Iranians did not denounce Islam or revive old religious and cultural values.