MAKING A LIVING IN TURAN

Animals, Land and Wages

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Ten years ago Sohrab Alavi was home in his Turan village only five or six months of the year. Since his return from the army he had been a shepherd for the Sangsari, the transhumant pastoralists who bring their flocks out of the mountains northeast of Tehran into Turan for the winter. His father’s land was not enough to support Sohrab and his four younger brothers, three of whom had already left Turan to find work in the town.

Sohrab’s wife, Parivash, was from a poorer, landless family. Her father had come to Turan from the south and died when his children were young. In order to support their mother and sister her two brothers went off to work as shepherds for the Sangsari while barely teenagers. Eventually they settled in Firuzkuh, a mountain town close to the Sangsari summer pastures.

Parivash persuaded Sohrab to move to Firuzkuh where she could be with her mother and brothers. She enjoyed the activity of a larger town. Besides the Sangsari and the Persian-speaking villagers like those from Turan, Turks, Kurds and gypsies thronged the bazaar, and there was a modern bath house where the Islamic rules for cleanliness, such as bathing after a woman’s menstrual period or intercourse, could be properly and comfortably fulfilled.

Sohrab missed Turan and his family. After the birth of their third child, they moved back. Their oldest child, a son, was left to be raised by Parivash’s mother and her still childless brothers, who would see to his education. For although the school in their Turan village had just been extended...
to the sixth grade with the aid of the Education Corps, a program whereby young army conscripts taught school in isolated village communities, they sought better opportunities for their son.

During Sohrab’s long periods away as a shepherd, Parivash looked after their steadily growing family. At home she made clothing for the family, weaving cotton and silk by hand until the early sixties when the countryside became more secure and it became more practical to buy cotton cloth from the towns. She was one of the first women in the village to get a sewing machine. She also went to the fields regularly to help her in-laws with harvesting wheat and barley, and later in the year with transplanting tobacco seedlings, weeding tobacco and cotton and picking off the small tobacco leaves so that others would grow larger. In the fall she picked cotton and tobacco and boiled grape juice down to make syrup.

Her oldest daughter was one of the first girls in the village to attend school. After school and in the summers she helped Parivash gather fodder for the old ewes and does and for the male lambs and kids they were fattening for winter meat and fat. In the spring they milked their twenty or so milch sheep and goats and made yoghurt, churned butter and processed the residue into other products. The animals also provided skins for storage and wool for sale. Although Parivash had no close relatives of her own in the village, she was fortunate to have a good working relationship with her mother and father-in-law for whom her children were the first resident grandchildren.

Meanwhile Sohrab earned top wages as a shepherd. The flock owner, who visited the flock only two or three times in winter when he brought barley for the animals and provisions for the shepherds, trusted Sohrab’s ability to match up the new lambs and kids with their mothers in the spring and generally to manage the flock. Sometimes Sohrab was allowed to include his own animals with the Sangarani flock, in which case he not only saved the fee he would pay a village shepherd but also the cost of supplemental barley and straw since the grazing is better away from the villages.

About seven years ago Sohrab began buying land and water with the money he saved from shepherding. First he bought some relatively unproductive land from a man who had already squandered a family fortune to feed his addiction to opium. A year later, with the help of his father,
Expedition

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products, which were scarce in the village and barely known in the cities. Shirin, who had married her cousin Farhad late in life, delivered her three children at the summer station. The summer her last child and only son was born, her brother's wife, another cousin, came to help out. She was the only one anxious to get back to the village for the others felt that their village of 150 was too crowded and in the fall were never in a hurry to go back. In those years Farhad stayed with the sheep at Chah Abu over the winter while Jahangir would take off for a month and more in the winter visiting relatives, including his sons by his first wife, in Tehran and other towns.

The year that Sohrab Alavi bought his land from Jahangir's brother was a year which was to change the lives of Jahangir and Farhad. The government had declared a large area bordering their village as a Protected Area and Wildlife Refuge because of its ecological importance. Signs were posted to prohibit hunting. Grazing, land and water had already been nationalized and there were rumors that grazing would be prohibited in the Protected Area. It was, in this context that Jahangir and Tavas decided to sell Chah Abu, his last sheep station, to a large Turan owner. The next summer Jahangir and Farhad worked out to take their animals to a rented summer station and keep them in the village in the winter. Jahangir spent a miserable summer smoking opium and sleeping while Farhad grazed their sheep and Shirin and Tavas processed the wool. The next summer, Jahangir and family were in rented quarters in a nearby provincial town planning to build a house. Farhad was at year

another summer place. Despite the thousands of hectares of rangeland in Turan it is not easy to find summer grazing. Between all the local owners who have summer stations and the Sangsari who pay guards through the summer to protect their winter grazing places there is little left over for men like Farhad. Farhad was now teamed up with his wife's brother and her sister's husband. The place they finally found was not fully agreed on by all parties and the relationship ended in violence shortly before the end of the season.

Each year Farhad struggles to find summer grazing for his own sheep and those of several relatives in the village. Shirin and his two daughters process the milk. Her brother visits them often to check on his sons who help Farhad with the herding, and sometimes brings his wife to spend a week at the house to help Shirin.

Over the years Farhad has invested money earned from his animals and his work with Jahangir in land (usually land Jahangir was selling to support his opium habit), winter travels, and Farhad's wages. By the time Jahangir moved to town Farhad had accumulated eighteen hours of water rights and 0.6 hectares of land. But he had also purchased a plot of land in the acquisition of land did not change his way of life and he continued to keep a variety of arrangements with his wife's only brother who plowed and planted for him and sometimes rented his land from him in exchange for Farhad's shepherding services and Shirin's milk processing. One of Farhad's main problems is the summer station in midsummer to help her mother's brother's wife with agricultural chores or to weed their own tobacco.

Farhad is now facing a difficult period. His son is too young to help him. His nephews, one of whom is likely to become his son-in-law, do not like shepherding. He could not show his goats in 1970 because he lacked the help needed. Most of his problems could be solved if he could find a sheep station to buy. But this is unlikely in Turan agricultural land circulates more easily than sheep stations.

His neighbor Sohrab Alavi will probably continue to spend three to four months away as a shepherd for he cannot meet family expenses with his petty fifty sheep, nine hours of water and 0.6 hectares of land. He will not build up his own flock because of the shortage of sheep stations and lack of sons or young male relatives (unless he is lucky in the future to get a hardworking son-in-law) to assist him. As long as the Sangsari are allowed to bring
flow and spring grazing limit production in bad years. Men are often obliged to turn to wage labor to meet expenses. Shepherding and sheep raising have allowed men like Farhad and Sohrab to stay and invest in land without having to consider wage labor in the cities. This pattern of shepherding and investment in land is not unique in Turan. Up to a third or more of the adult men in some villages work as shepherds for the Sangarsi, the government or other large owners. In the five-year period during which we have been in contact with the people of Turan several landless men have invested in their first land and water. These are the men who have opted to stay in Turan even though the facilities of urban life—electricity, upper level schooling, health care, running water, mosques and bazaars—are lacking. For the men who do not prefer a life of herding or agriculture there is little else to do in Turan and they go to the cities for work.

The Turan pattern of converting wages or profits from shepherding to irrigated agriculture has occurred because Turan is a region of small holders. Land is a commodity which is periodically available in small amounts of a tenth of a hectare or less, enabling a young family to invest in a resource which gives added security in the face of low and fluctuating rainfall. This pattern is characteristic of small, scattered, isolated settlements in the more arid parts of Iran. Although few families manage to accumulate significant wealth they have always been free of the domination of large land owners. However, they remain dependent on investment from external sources to afford them the flexibility to get through bad years. In the past this investment has taken the form of qanat construction. In the recent economic boom they have been able to migrate seasonally to the towns and pick up wage labor. Throughout, the Sangarsi animals have continued to come down annually from the mountains and provide opportunities for wage labor in Turan.