

## **Preface**

### **Researching a Revolution: 1978–1979**

**WHEN I FLEW TO IRAN IN JUNE 1978**, I did not know I would be conducting field research about a revolution. My study was originally to have been about agricultural credit systems in rural Iran to shed light on processes of change in social, political and economic relations in an Iranian village. The ten prospective village fieldwork sites I visited near Shiraz, capital of the southwestern province of Fars, seemed to fall into three categories. Villages close to Shiraz demonstrated a new prosperity due to employment opportunities in and near the city. Other villages prospered due to land reform and mechanized agricultural irrigation. A third category of village was characterized by poverty and the absence of able-bodied men. These settlements had not benefited from land reform and were far enough away from Shiraz to prevent villagers from commuting for work. Men moved away to find work, leaving mainly the elderly and less able living in the home village.

In one of these latter settlements, my family and I and the two staff members from Shiraz University kind enough to escort us were served tea and watermelon in an open area among the ramshackle mudbrick homes. We ate, swatting away the many flies, watched quietly by barefoot children in tattered clothing who knew the treat was not for them. The little group of villagers talked with us about their need for water and the inequity of the land distribution. One slight old man (actually probably about 55) pleaded insistently with us to convey the village's needs to the provincial governor, to ask him to at least give them a paved road. The road to the nearby town was impassible during the rainy season because of thick mud.

Women experiencing trouble in childbirth had died because they couldn't be brought to the town only a few kilometers away. I passed this plea on to the highest official I could, but with little hope of benefit.

In late summer we settled in Aliabad, a relatively prosperous village close to Shiraz. A bus line to the outskirts of the city meant my then-husband could get to Pahlavi University (now Shiraz University), where he had a Fulbright teaching position for the year. I was directed by the gendarmerie (rural police) office in Shiraz to present my letter of research permission to the captain of the Qodratabad gendarmerie station 2.2 kilometers (about 1.4 miles) from Aliabad. The captain took me to the home of Mashd<sup>1</sup> Musa Saedi in Aliabad with the suggestion that we reside in his home. When I explained that I wished to live in the "old village" within the village walls, he took us to the home of another government representative in the old village. Then I used the excuse that his courtyard was not tiled and I was concerned about my one-year-old child, Karima, playing in the dirt. When the gendarmerie captain took us to the home of Seyyid<sup>2</sup> Yaqub Askari, whose courtyard *was* tiled, I didn't know what to say. The appearance of his courtyard told me he was a member of the village elite. In fact, he was the *de facto* village boss and main government representative in Aliabad, I learned later, no matter who formally held offices. We rented three rooms in his courtyard<sup>3</sup> for the first half of our period in the village. After the Revolution, when the gendarmes were no longer in control and in fact no center of control in Shiraz was effective, I felt free to change my residence to another courtyard. The second half of my stay I lived with neighbors sympathetic to the local uprising against Seyyid Yaqub's powerful brother, Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari.

Because I wished to conduct research in a village in the midst of changing economic relations, I had hoped to live in a smaller and more remote settlement, but Aliabad, with its history of political significance and conflict and many residents' activism during the revolutionary period, turned out to be a fruitful site.

Aliabad was a village of some 3,000 then, a population in constant flux as villagers moved away and others returned. Many villagers came back from Shiraz and elsewhere to build urban-style homes in the "new village" across the highway from the old walled settlement. The convenient travel between Aliabad and Shiraz, as well as the nearby factories and construction sites, were among the reasons for the relative prosperity of residents. The plentiful availability of jobs in the late 1970s meant that few households in Aliabad were extremely needy. This relative economic prosperity

resulted in a major research challenge for me. I could not find any girl living nearby whose family needed money enough to overcome the stigma against females working. Time available for interviewing was minimized and frequently interrupted while I gave attention to my still-nursing daughter and cared for my household. The 18-month grant, instead of the more typical 9-month research period, from the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies was all the more welcome to me—a mother as well as a researcher.

In addition to its relatively large size and its prosperity resulting from close proximity to Shiraz, Aliabad was unusual in having facilities not ordinarily found in Iranian villages. Aliabad had been chosen by the national government to be somewhat of a model village and had water piped into many courtyards, piped natural gas, electricity, a full elementary school and a clinic.<sup>4</sup>

In spite of the limiting and awkward position of living in the courtyard of the village boss, I attempted to get acquainted with villagers. Meeting the Askaris' relatives and associates was not difficult. Rana, social leader of the informal group of seyyid women and wife of Seyyid Yaqub's nephew Seyyid Enayat Askari, soon became a friend. Rana hosted the meetings led by personnel from the conservative Religious School of Zahra in Shiraz. In the nearby courtyard of Seyyid Ayyub, Seyyid Yaqub's father's brother, I became acquainted with Seyyid Ayyub's son Seyyid Kazem, a gifted political analyst, and with members of other households in the courtyard who in turn brought me into contact with still more relatives. Seyyid Ayyub's youngest daughter brought her nephew Hushang Amini, who attended Tehran University for a few months before it closed, to meet me. In this way, contact was established between me and Haidar Amini's family, several of whom proved to be important informants. This family was respected and connected to several village factions yet remained relatively neutral regarding the Revolution<sup>5</sup> and the post-revolutionary uprising against Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari. Family members were well-informed about village history and current conflicts. Because of their status and political neutrality, they did not seem to fear negative results from association with "the Americans." In retrospect, I suspect that the sight of Haidar Amini's son Behnam escorting the American family to his father's home at dinner-time must have helped shield us in the sensitive period right after the Revolution. The family of Haidar Amini was one of the few families who continued to associate with us during that time.

When I needed a *chador* (a semicircle of cloth used as an enveloping veil) and a couple of pairs of the loose pants worn by village women at home, Seyyid Yaqub's wife, Rezvan, sent for Esmat Ajami, a young widow and seamstress who did sewing for her, to come meet me. Esmat lived not far from the Askaris with her two sons; her widowed mother, who brought cloth from Shiraz to sell; and her married brother who ran a tailoring shop in Shiraz. The Ajami home was a center of activity; women dropped by to buy cloth from the mother, often sewed by Esmat into chadors; loose pants for men, women and children; infant layettes; and traditional women's clothing. Esmat's brother, who commuted to Shiraz, and relatives visiting from Shiraz kept Esmat informed about events in the city. The weekly visit from the religious narrative chanter was another source of information. With her quick, analytical mind and able verbal skills, Esmat questioned visitors about happenings in the village and in Shiraz. Sifting and combining stories, she could then produce a full, rich account of a particular event. Her experience and skills were most helpful to me, especially after the hostages were taken at the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and subsequently when those villagers who did not know me well hesitated to tell me about ongoing political happenings. Esmat's in-laws were important organizers in the local struggle against Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari, then the largest owner of Aliabad land, and she was frequently called upon to serve tea at meetings of the opposition. Although basically illiterate then, Esmat was a repository of religious stories and descriptions of village customs. Once she quietly confessed to me that she too was interested in asking older people about village history and social customs and had done so when she was young. As she matured, however, she was told this was not seemly, so she stopped her inquiries. Esmat Khanum<sup>6</sup> became one of my most important informants and, during my visits between 2003 and 2008, was a highly skilled and knowledgeable research assistant as well as my closest friend.<sup>7</sup>

Although I was discouraged by Seyyid Yaqub and his wife, I also sought out peasants and former heads of agricultural groups to interview. When I moved to another courtyard after the Revolution, it became easier to have contact with peasants and with members of the opposition to the Shah's government and to Seyyid Yaqub Askari and Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari. Several times I visited the home of Shaikh Rahim Kazemi, leader of the opposition and earlier a supporter of the Tudeh Party and Prime Minister Mosaddeq, and became friendly with his daughter. Especially after

Seyyid Ibn Ali was put in jail, villagers became more open and less fearful in describing for me their suffering at his hands. The effect of residing in Seyyid Yaqub's courtyard—and of being an American and thus connected whether I liked it or not with the Pahlavi regime and its agents and sympathizers—was never entirely removed. My association with the sey-yids was regular whereas my interviews with the opposition were somewhat sporadic. Partly due to research conditions, contact with the members of current and earlier oppositional movements, peasants, commuters and migrants living in Shiraz remained relatively limited. Although I set eyes on Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari once or twice when he was visiting his brother's village courtyard and at one or two family picnics, I never conversed with him personally, nor was I even introduced to him.

During the first two or three months of my stay in Aliabad, I continued with my original research plans, interviewing people on the political and economic history of the village and learning something about current political and economic organization, divisions within the village, politically powerful persons and economic, political and social relations with persons outside the village. I visited men working in orchards, vineyards and wheat fields. I looked into both agriculture and trading.

By October 1979, though, it became impossible to avoid preoccupation with the state of the Revolution. Like many others in the village, I did not miss the BBC radio news broadcasts on Iran and could talk of nothing but the political situation. It was a strain to live under such circumstances, especially because of my long-time association with Iran and deep concern about many dear Iranian friends as well as the fate of the society. (I had served as an English high school teacher in the Peace Corps in north-western Iran from 1966 through 1968 and had made several study trips to Iran since then.) The near future was fraught with uncertainty. There was a daily death toll during the months leading up to the fall of the Shah's regime, and a sad and frightening barrage of news about violent government encounters with revolutionary forces. Each day began with the short BBC morning report. All day long, thoughts and conversations centered on the uprising as I exchanged information and evaluation with everyone I encountered. The last thing at night before trying to sleep was listening to the 45-minute BBC Persian newscast—with the radio on battery power and in lamplight because employees of the government Office of Electricity turned off the electricity every night all over Iran to show their support for the revolutionary movement.

My previous experiences in Iran had left me predisposed to be sympathetic to the revolutionary movement. Repression and violence by Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's<sup>8</sup> government against the Kurds, discussions with Iranian social scientists who suffered from persecution and lack of intellectual freedom, and observations and conversations during visits to Iran during 1966 to 1968, 1971 to 1972, and the summers of 1970 and 1977, as well as contact with Iranians in the United States left me anticipating a revolution at some point—but not this soon. Because of my sympathies, I participated in movement activities. I entered into conversations, listened to tapes and exchanged information. (I had learned to speak Persian in 1966.) I joined with other women in evening marches and in shouting political slogans in Aliabad, and then when some of the village women began going to Shiraz for marches, I went with them. There, to prevent me from getting separated from them, my friends tied corners of their chadors to mine or protectively formed a barrier by walking in a circle around me. I interviewed villagers about their experiences and attitudes about demonstrations and confrontations with armed forces in Shiraz, and recorded incidents in the village related to the Revolution, interviewing participants and others. Gradually it became clear my research would focus on the Revolution rather than on agricultural credit.

In January and February 1979, the period before the fall of Prime Minister Shapour Bakhtiar's<sup>9</sup> government, I was invited to come to the daily morning Qoran classes for females at the mosque, including discussions about Islam and the Revolution, taught by a prayer leader from the religious center of Qom stationed in the village at the time. Women took me to the mosque for evening prayers, often followed by a rousing speech on the revolutionary movement or Islamic government. Of course I took notes on everything.

For a long time it was difficult to communicate with the outside world. Employees of the postal service went on strike for several months before February 11, 1979, and employees of the government telephone and telegraph services were on strike too. Once in a while we could send a letter with someone leaving the country. Immediately after February 11, the day the Shah's government fell, I joined the long lines of people waiting at the telephone office in Shiraz, again open for service, to call and reassure loved ones outside the country. Even after the Revolution and the end of the strikes, mail was slow and erratic. For a time the borders were closed to adult males trying to leave the country, so even the use of personal couriers

was restricted. In spite of their suffering during the revolutionary period, exacerbated by my inability to communicate with them, my supportive parents never once asked me to come home but left me to decide for myself what was safe and whether to continue my research.

My American citizenship and the revolutionary conditions of the fieldwork period restricted research in several ways. The greatest research challenge was the constant and overwhelming suspicion that I was a spy, probably a CIA agent, or that I was in Iran to work for American interests. This suspicion had a greater impact on my research during specific periods. The worst point was during the two or three months after the return of Ayatollah Khomeini from France to Iran on February 1, 1979, and the February 11 collapse of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi's regime. Iranians sympathetic to the revolutionary movement were pleased to have the interest and involvement of foreigners before the fall of the regime, but immediately after the success of the Revolution, a main concern was the possibility that the CIA would assist other forces in bringing back the Shah. People remembered 1953 and feared a modified replay of the CIA-engineered coup that overthrew popularly elected Prime Minister Mosaddeq and returned the Shah to power. Revolutionary activists were preoccupied with fear that their hard-won Revolution would be reversed. Every American was suspected of being a CIA agent. This suspicion was encouraged by a barrage of anti-American propaganda on radio and TV and in the press. Villagers wondered why we had stayed in Iran when other Americans had been evacuated. A few Aliabad people thought I was indeed a sociologist or anthropologist but had been sent to study Iranian agriculture so the US imperialists could cause its further deterioration and create even greater markets for their own products. Or they thought I had been sent to study Iranian culture and society and help plan how to keep Iranians entertained with other activities and out of politics.

Just before the success of the Revolution on February 11, I had been attending evening meetings, including revolutionary speeches, and a morning Qoran class at the mosque. After the Revolution, I continued for a couple of weeks. Then a friend, Mohammad Amini, told us a group of villagers felt antagonistic toward us and wished to attack and burn our home, take our possessions and carry us bodily out of the village. Mohammad was able to persuade this group that if we could obtain a letter from the religious authorities in Shiraz certifying our harmlessness we should be allowed to stay. If we could not, he suggested to us—before he himself stopped inter-

acting with us due to concern for his own revolutionary credentials and effectiveness in the revolutionary movement—we should leave. Through an American anthropologist married to a man from Shiraz, I was able to meet the daughter of an important religious figure. This woman trusted me and arranged an interview with her father. The two of them appreciated research on revolutionary Islam, a main focus of my research by then—and of my anticipated book—and promised to do what they could to obtain a letter for me.

While waiting for the letter, I did not attempt any research. One day at the height of the negative feelings against us, I packed all of my research notebooks into a big bag and left with my family to stay with friends in Shiraz for a couple of days. During these few months of our stay in Aliabad, we suffered the unhappiness of being suspected by those who had previously befriended us. Only three or four families in the village would talk to us. My then-husband especially was insulted and shouted at in the alleyways of the village and on the bus going into town, “Go home, American.” He was heckled and threatened, usually by young men, while in Shiraz. In Shiraz, a young man on a motorcycle used a slingshot to shoot a bolt at an American woman, a friend of ours, while she was out walking with her husband and two young children, raising a great bruise. This incident, in addition to reports about the few Americans, high-level military and business officials, who had been killed in Iran, caused us some worry about our personal safety and that of our young child. Such experiences, plus the continual suspicion directed at us, had a detrimental effect on my research even after the situation had calmed down to some extent. I assumed a cautious approach, becoming immediately sensitive to any signs of hesitation in a potential informant.

Although my gender left me with the time-consuming “women’s work” of caring for a child and household, and with less freedom for research, at this time, being a woman was an advantage. Villagers were less concerned about my potential political harmfulness. I could continue to visit with my close female friends, who as women were also assumed to be apolitical. They were not suspected of collaboration but were rather seen as sympathetic and hospitable to the American woman in their midst. During these uncomfortable times, if a few days elapsed when I did not see the compassionate Rana, she would send her little daughter after me. (Sadly, when I returned in September 2003, after an absence of almost 24 years, this dear person was confined to bed and had trouble speaking; she had



suffered a series of strokes.) Still welcome in several homes, I could at least sit and listen to conversations about ongoing national and local events. Driven to ask questions and take notes about something, I turned to customs. I asked women about their activities connected with life-cycle events and other social occasions and commemorations. Quite by accident, then, the major role of women in maintaining social relations, and thereby political alliances as well, was revealed to me.

Eventually, the letter Mohammad Amini had advised us to get was provided. I took it to Mr. Rohani, the visiting *mulla* (preacher, religious specialist) from Qom. The letter was posted in the mosque courtyard. Gradually, whether due to the letter or not, attitudes toward us began softening, and by the summer wedding season we had been reintegrated into village society and were invited guests at most marriage celebrations.

Some months later my Shiraz friend told me she had gone to the Islamic court, the Revolutionary Committee, and her uncle, an even more important religious figure than her father; no one was willing to sign a letter for the American woman researcher. Only her father could be persuaded to do this. As he handed her the letter, she told me, he said, "You know what a chance I'm taking, don't you?" I'm grateful to him and others who helped me stay in Aliabad for another ten months of research after February 11.

A second crisis occurred in early fall of 1979. Karima, who was now two, and I took a trip to Mahabad and Sanandaj in the Kurdish area of Iran. I thought it would be beneficial to get some idea about Sunni<sup>10</sup> attitudes toward the Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini. Because I had lived in Mahabad for two years as a Peace Corps volunteer 12 years earlier, it was also an opportunity to see old friends. The Kurds as well as other ethnic groups had risen up against the government. Ayatollah Khomeini declared *jihad*, holy war, against the Kurds. He ordered a major government attack on Sanandaj on August 19, 1979, two days after I ended my two-week visit to Kurdistan. The army began its siege against Mahabad on August 20, 1979, and on September 3, took over this largest Iranian Kurdish city. Then the government began executing many Kurds. When villagers in Aliabad found out I had been in the Kurdish area, many of them jumped to the conclusion that I had been there as a CIA agent to signal the beginning of the Kurdish revolt. Their reasoning was not surprising as the government radio, TV and press often repeated that the CIA had instigated the "problems" in Kurdistan, to disrupt the revolutionary government and bring

back the Shah as the British and the American CIA had done in 1953. I was again unable to conduct much research for two or three weeks, until this suspicion died down.

A third point of difficulty in conducting research occurred after radical students took over the American Embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979, and seized 66 Americans as hostages. Government propaganda against America again began to have an effect. Although villagers did not change in their courtesy toward me, suspicion persisted. At a dinner celebrating the return from Mecca of a *haji*,<sup>11</sup> someone asked when I was leaving. A young woman, a relative of the haji now living in Shiraz, said quietly, "They'll let her know before they start bombing, and that's when she'll leave."

If villagers were not rude, fewer people were willing to talk openly with me. Toward the end of my stay I was relying almost entirely on close friends to provide me with information on the very interesting political events taking place in the village.

Several of the radically anti-American young men in Aliabad were apparently spreading rumors that I was working as a spy for the local landlord. Although pleased to have me present taking photos during the takeover of Seyyid Ibn Ali Askari's land on November 2, 1979, later on participants feared I would show the photos to the Askaris to identify those who had joined in this activity. Leaders of the village-level "revolution" were reluctant to discuss their strategies and activities in the battle against the landlord and his supporters. Although I was actually sympathetic to the local uprising, this problem was compounded by the fact that I had lived in the courtyard of Seyyid Ibn Ali's brother, Seyyid Yaqub, during the first half of my stay.

At the same time, by then I was not on good terms with Seyyid Yaqub and his family. Now that contact with Americans had become a political liability instead of an advantage, his son Seyyid Muslem and Muslem's wife, Mina, were not cordial to us as they had been before the Revolution. Just as for others, their association with us could only be detrimental to them at this point. As the local conflict escalated, some of Seyyid Ibn Ali's relatives developed resentment against me because of my apparent lack of sympathy for him. I did continue to occasionally visit several of the Askari women and others supporting the Askari faction, thereby leaving myself open to being called a spy by both sides, just as would anyone else who visited people on both sides of this local conflict.

People had to be concerned about their own reputations and standing in the view of others should they associate with me. Even those who trusted my motives feared divulging information and attitudes to me in case I would unknowingly or accidentally jeopardize their safety and welfare by passing on such information to other villagers or persons in authority. Ever since I had first lived in Iran in 1966, I had observed Iranians to be wisely cautious about revealing their political attitudes. Discussion of politics did become amazingly open in Iran during the few months before and after February 11, 1979. Many Iranians subsequently paid for their candor with their lives. This atmosphere of fear, insecurity and suspicion shaped my research procedures far more effectively than any plans of my own. From the beginning of my stay in Aliabad, I acted with restraint, leaving many questions unasked. Throughout, I felt almost like a human barometer, constantly evaluating the atmosphere for the current pressure of suspicion before making decisions about what subjects could be covered and what questions could be asked. I did not attempt a census, surveys or maps. My one attempt to use a questionnaire, about practices for celebrating the birthday of the Hidden Imam,<sup>12</sup> was unsuccessful. In answer to my questions about who did what and what amounts of money were involved, my prospective informant gave noncommittal, vague responses such as “whoever felt like doing it” and “whatever amount of money people felt like spending.” He clearly did not want to give me any specific answers, even on such a seemingly innocuous subject.

Use of a tape recorder was likewise inappropriate. As reluctance to allow interviews to be recorded was obvious, most often I did not even ask. Once early in the research I did ask and was given permission, but during the discussion I sensed that the informant did not wish to touch on sensitive issues. He talked about vineyard tending practices. Somehow, Seyyid Yaqub Askari learned of the recording session and jocularly asked me to play the tape because, he said, it would be fun to hear how the man’s voice sounded. As the man had made no incriminating comments, and refusing would cast suspicion on him, I played it. Later I learned that this informant had lost all of his agricultural land to the Askaris during the conflict described in Chapter 2 and that he was “retired” and unable to work because of psychological problems, probably a nervous breakdown and depression resulting from his failed struggle against the Askaris. This incident provided an illustration of why villagers were cautious about voicing their grievances and especially did not want interviews to be re-

corded. An exception was when I was given permission to tape a lengthy interview, quoted in Chapter 5, with Seyyid Mostafa Askari about the 1978 Tasua and Ashura demonstrations.

My research was relatively undirected and relied mainly on the traditional anthropological techniques of participant observation and informal, unstructured interviewing. At some points I felt the only way I could collect information was merely to take part in or listen to ongoing conversation, with no attempt to ask questions or even nudge the subject of conversation. Instead of using a questionnaire approach and gathering information from a large number of people, I used a small circle of informants who trusted me and I gathered case material and information on a large area of related subjects. To check the material, I asked the same questions of as many people as possible and elicited descriptions of incidents from several people, often members of divergent factions.

Also because of the sensitive conditions, I was not able to travel much, to go to government offices for information or visit research institutes and utilize the work of Iranian social scientists. It seemed best to stay right in the village as much as possible and avoid calling outsiders' attention to myself.

In spite of the strain, uncertainty and difficulties of conducting field research during this turbulent period, it proved to be a valuable and memorable experience and the most fascinating 18 months of my life. A Shirazi friend wrote to her sister in the United States, "You missed the best year of your life!" Observing the dedication, respect for others, selflessness, cooperation and unity displayed during the months of revolutionary fervor and the optimism and joy shown during revolutionary marches left an impact not entirely removed by subsequent developments.

I am grateful for the courtesy and kindness of Iranians toward me and my daughter, Karima, a lone American woman and child-in-arms, even while we were shopping near the American Embassy in December 1979, several weeks after radical students took 66 Americans hostage, before we left for the United States. (Karima's father had left in July 1979.) When, against the advice of friends, I replied truthfully to inquiries from strangers in Shiraz or Tehran about my nationality, the usual response was, "Oh, we like Americans. It's just their government we don't like." Back in the States, I could not help but note the contrast when I saw the great anger of many Americans directed against hapless Iranian students. Apparently Americans did not distinguish people from their government as easily as most Iranians did. During my visits between 2003 and 2008 as

well, Iranians, even those who didn't know me, showed hospitality to and delighted interest in an American.

To protect anonymity, the names of village residents, the research site and neighboring villages are fictitious.

In the interest of easier reading, diacritical marks are not used. I have transcribed Persian words and names into English according to the way they are commonly spelled or the way they sound if not found often in English writing. Persian language words used often, such as *kadkhoda*, are left un-italicized after introduction and are included in the glossary.