

***Iran: A Modern History.* Abbas Amanat. New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2017, 907.**

Fatima Raza \*

*Iran: A Modern History* Abbas Amanat's is not a traditional account of the Iranian history; rather it is an entirely unconventional discourse on history by a historian who displays a great grip on the subject. The book, a Yale university press publication, is an enlightening read but only for the truly devoted disciples of history, owing to its comprehensive nature. Panning over 900 pages, this beautifully written history of Iran covers accounts from 1501 to 2009. The author is a skilful historian and narrator whose words grip the readers from beginning till end. To an observant reader, this book reflects the author's love and pride of the Iranian civilisation.

The book comprises of four parts: A Shi'i Empire; Reshaping of the Guarded Domains; A Nation Recast and A Contested Revolution and the Rise of the Islamic Republic. Amanat has recounted the history of the Iranian civilisation in a sequential manner but through the lens of theological analysis. Throughout the chapters, the flow of writing is both sequential and thematic which accentuates the historic course of events with analysis that focuses on the role of clergy intertwined with the political identity of the Iranian state. Iran, as a land oft-invaded has distinctively preserved its culture above all other attributes of its ancient heritage. As the author noted, credit goes to the prevalent quality of the Persian language, which owing to the adoption of Arabic script in the early ninth century was sufficiently preserved.

The author elaborates how the vast and well-organised Persian state was the envy of the ancient Greeks to whom this state was unfamiliar and superior. The Persians came to be known as 'barbarians' which accurately means 'alien' as the Persian language with its many dialects was dense to them. However, the author emphasises how the Greeks felt threatened by the material and cultural superiority of the 'mighty' Persian Empire. However, their immense wealth failed to win them glory in their war with

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\* *The reviewer is Research Associate at the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad.*

the Greeks which later came to be known as the ‘Persian Wars’ (499 BC-449 BC), ironically named as the Persians were defeated. However, almost all Greek artistic depictions of the Persian wars and recordings of history combined, seem to be paying homage to the great Persian Kingdom, a land of femininity and exotic culture; an Orient par excellence in the true sense of the word. However, the Persian culture did not remain indigenously unperturbed. The Greek conquest also resulted in an infusion of Hellenistic culture into the Iranian world, which continued well into the Islamic era of the Persian Empire.

This book on the Iranian history is hard to classify into specific themes as it covers the evolution of all aspects of the Iranian society, its political system and religion. For a first time reader of the Iranian history, it is perhaps a bit too complicated but, for those who have delved into the norms and culture of this region for some time, it is an invigorating read. The author combines all elements necessary to the compilation of a nation’s history but he also adds a special ingredient; the love and affection he feels for his own people who are proud, resilient, resourceful and determined. It is important to note that he focuses on the journey of the Iranian nation towards revolution with utmost reverence but it seems he also inadvertently lets slip that the revolution was not as much a feat of sacred sacrifice as espoused by its perpetrators. Rather it was the fate, the direction and the very innately logical course of action for the Iranian nation and it always had been.

The Persian concepts about the sanctity of governance and the rulers had always prepared the society to rise if anything was amiss from the predefined notions and standards of a just rule. For example, the author explains the ancient Persian origin of the term *Shah*. The word derives from *xshay* which means, ‘the one who deserves to rule (on his own merit).’ This was contiguous with many other contemporary cultures of that time as it meant that power should be in the hands of someone worthy who is also a divine choice. However, in Persia, it was known that the *Shah* could lose his sacred title and position if he failed to deliver and meet the set standards. People could depose him with uprisings and revolts to demand fair rule. Thus, the foundation for the big Islamic revolution of 1979 had already been laid. It was just a matter of how much a *Shah* could be led astray from the Old Persian nobility standards.

## Book Review

Amanat's wonderful effort has created this masterpiece of history which embodies such exquisite details of the cultural and political evolution of the Iranian history that it comes at par with the timeless *Shahnameh*. He inspiringly puts together a piece of work that not need to be read if one does not completely indulge. However, it should not be mistaken for a poetic whimsy rather it has woven together both articulation and analysis. Having read this book might not provide an accurate insight into present day's Iran of Rouhani and Khamenei but it serves a bigger purpose; of having encapsulated one of the most vibrant, diverse and timeless cultures of all in one book of reason; Iran and its modern history.