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Qom to Tehran and Back, Express: Branding a “Suburb”?

As I stood at the Qom Railway Station awaiting the high-speed train to Tehran, a banner on the wall caught my attention. “Suburban Rail,” read the title, “Qatār-hā-ye Hūmeh-ī” in Persian, followed by a brief definition of the term, for which, I later learned, “regional rail” was a more suitable equivalent in English. As explained methodically on the website of Iran Railways, in addition to regular intercity train services, the capital Tehran is also connected to a few medium-sized and small cities by commuter/suburban rail and regional rail. While the Tehran-Pīshvā and Tehran-Parand lines are categorised as commuter/suburban, the services from Tehran to Qom and Karaj are called regional rails.¹

On that day, however, the designation “Suburban Rail” engaged my attention beyond technicality. Despite the 140-kilometre distance between Qom and Tehran, the fare was like a giveaway. It is still notoriously low-cost, perhaps the lowest among intercity services in Iran, carrying around 300 passengers in each direction five times a day. In terms of price, it does sound like a suburban rail service, implying that it is heavily, distinctively subsidised.

This observation leads us to two important facts.

First, as the well-known economic adage goes, “There is no such thing as a free lunch.” The relatively low cost of living in Qom, benefiting from massive developmental plans, and being branded, albeit unwittingly, as a “suburb” of the capital have ironically contributed to a steady rise in the cost of living in Qom over the last decade. Along with Karaj, Arāk, and other newly developing cities at commuting distances from Tehran, Qom currently serves as a reserve area for the influx of surplus population from rural and less-developed regions of Iran who cannot afford to migrate to their traditional destination, Tehran.²

Second, and on an expressively cultural level, the Tehran-induced vivacity has triggered conflicting branding trends and, consequentially, contradictory social developments.

On the one hand, Qom, historically renowned as a religiously orthodox place, is receiving officially organised branding treatments to revitalise its traditional

1 Cf. Labbāfī and Shokūhī, n.d.

2 The head of the Housing Foundation of Islamic Revolution proposed in 2015 that cities like Arāk and Qom can become “satellite cities” of Tehran and receive the latter’s “surplus population.” Quoted in Dana, 2015.

identity. In public, municipal designations, Qom is referred to as “Shahr-e Karī-meh,” meaning the city of *Ḥaẓrat-e Maʿsūmeh*, the holy sister of Imam ‘Alī ibn Mūsā ar-Rezā, the eighth Shiʿite Imam, whose tomb in Mashhad, is one of the Shia world’s most prominent religious epicentres, along with Qom. Qom is also globally famous for housing the greatest Shia scholarly hub that, apart from the mark on its identity, has secured a sizable, consistent religious stratum in the population.

In light of these historical factors, governmental (re-)branding initiatives have moved in a direction that concurrently seeks to boost the city’s economy while also appealing to its traditional profile. For instance, Iran’s Ministry of Cultural Heritage, Tourism, and Handicrafts has designated Qom the “National City of Ring-Making.”³ A beautiful, valuable item of personal possession and souvenir, the hand-made Persian silver ring has often been a cultural sign with significations of religiosity and piety. The Governor General of Qom has also emphasised the necessity for Qom to become a “branding centre in the production of black *Chādor*,”⁴ the traditional cloak worn by women. A Deputy of Qom Governor’s Office called the city “a paradise for investment” with a specific eye to its potentials in “[religious] tourism.”⁵

On the other hand, the favoured push towards urban evolution has led to developments disrupting the very official line of branding. Gentrification, the expansion of consumption venues and facilities, and the general restructuring of habits of thought and performance instigated by the new media do not appear to be conducive to the ideological purpose of such infrastructural developments.

The modernisation of Qom was perhaps meant to provide the people of Qom with a “safe” Tehran, one free of its excesses. The move, however, has led to the production/satisfaction of unintended, unexpected desires. The complete renovation of major parts of the city, both residential and commercial, has made it difficult to tell the difference between Qom and Tehran.⁶ The new citizens of Qom are increasingly moving away from their former persona and resembling their Tehrani counterparts. They are actively rebranding themselves in consumer terms adopted from Tehran.

Consider the feedback loop that exists between eateries and social networking platforms. Every week, new fast-food joints and cafes open in Qom, unmistakably modelled after similar places in Tehran. Instagram pages known for reviewing and promoting such businesses are then employed, spreading content that in turn fol-

³ Cf. Tehran Times, 2021.

⁴ IQNA, 2020. Translated by the author.

⁵ ILNA, 2019. Translated by the author.

⁶ For the neoliberalisation and “Tehranisation” of Qom, cf. also Duaei, 2019.

lows in the footsteps of those active in Tehran cyberspace. The cycle comes full circle when customers eat there and post about their moments, confirming that the purpose of the sequence was met. More than material fulfilment, these new consumers seem to seek the aesthetic aspect of the experience, and Tehran appears to be the deciding factor.

In this way, Qom is progressively being reconfigured into a less excessive Tehran, a Tehran that feels at home in Qom, influenced by and attuned to religious and secular factors alike. And the figure of the middle-class religious individual finds herself or himself at the crossroads of these clashing waves: they enjoy the modern urban amenities while being liberated from the undesirable aspects of the capital, and at the same time they experience the surge of socio-cultural change that tightens the boundaries of religiosity and undermines the very traditional identity whose maintenance has attracted such sources of change.

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