

# Metamorphosis of Reza Davari Ardakani

## From modernity critic to development thinker



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### ANALYSIS EXCLUSIVE

The book "The Account of Reza," written by Mohammad Javad Safian and Jamal Same, is the result of several years of research, dialogue, and rereading of the thoughts of one of the most consequential contemporary Iranian philosophers; a thinker whose name is intertwined with the critique of modernity, with an obsessive concern regarding the relation of Iran to the new world, and with a pronounced sensitivity toward the concept of development: Dr. Reza Davari Ardakani. Yet what distinguishes this book from other writings on Davari is the narration of a quiet yet profound metamorphosis; a metamorphosis that commences with a philosopher critical of modernity and culminates in a thinker who today conceives development not as an optional preference, but as a historical necessity for Iran.

#### Story of an intellectual transmutation

In the earliest decades of his activity, Davari Ardakani articulated the necessity of transcending the "pillars of the welfare-seeking and technic-intoxicated Western mentality". Like many thinkers after the Islamic Revolution of Iran, he awaited the possibility that "another path" might be disclosed before Iran, a path distinct from the modern world. Yet gradually and through the observation of the realities of the age, he humbly acknowledged that "no other path" is opened before us. The new world has arrived with its technique, its science, and its specific order, and lagging behind it is not merely deprivation from its facilities; it is another modality of a-historicity. This transformation is the axial theme of the book; a narration that reveals how Davari transmuted from a philosopher critical of modernity into a philosopher thinking in terms of development.

He states with candor, "I had imagined that one might become emancipated from dependence on the new technique, but this was an optimistic fantasy. History follows a logical pattern." These sentences are not merely a confession by a thinker; they are a mirror reflecting our collective experience during two centuries of confrontation with the West. Davari's principal question: Why did we not become?

The root of Davari's entry into the discourse of development lies in his distinctive understanding of "the West". The West, for him, is neither a geography nor an ideology; it is "a relation to the world," a mode of being constituted upon science and the will to mastery. For this reason, Davari maintains that Iran during the past two centuries, without comprehending this relation, has merely adopted the externalities of the West — knowledge, technology, the accent of politics, and the forms of life — without entering its world.

To put it more plainly:

- We learned knowledge, but we did not transform it into science.
- We purchased technology, but we did not engender technique.
- We possess universities, but we do not possess problems.

In Davari's expression, our difficulty is "the absence of yearning". We desire science and development, yet we do not will them. This is the very point he articulates with explicitness and audacity in his preface to that book, "We possess science, but we do not possess the will to science. We desire development, but we must will development." In truth, Davari conceives underdevelopment not as an economic or political phenomenon, but as an existential one: a condition in which "the horizon of the future" is sealed, and society remains at the level of "entities" and does not ap-



Reza Davari Ardakani

prehend "being"; that is, it does not inaugurate possibilities.

The structure of the book is three strata of a single problem. The book comprises three theoretical sections and two dialogue-centered sections, all of which have been composed with precision and order by researchers of the intellectual movement of development.

#### 1. Elements of development and underdevelopment in Davari's thought:

In this section, Davari's perspective on modern science, technique, the West, and the relation of Iran to them is synthesized. One of his crucial ideas is that:

- Modern science is not merely "knowledge," but a modality of relation to the world.
- Technique is not the product of science; rather, modern science has been technical from its inception.
- And a society deprived of technique is not only impoverished, but devoid of a world.

For the general reader, this section is among the most captivating because it reveals that underdevelopment does not signify "a shortage of machinery and factories"; rather, it signifies the absence of a relation and a historical horizon.

#### 2. Between the critique of modernity and the acceptance of necessity:

In this section, Davari's most significant intellectual transformation becomes manifest. He asserts that the West cannot be merely imitated, yet it cannot be escaped. Modernity has opened possibilities that have transformed the world, and any society that disregards these possibilities becomes arrested in history. Davari's key point is that development is not "the pro-

gram of governments," but:

- dependent on political rationality,
- dependent on historical experience,
- and, above all, dependent on collective yearning.

One of his important sentences is: "One may learn science, but one cannot inject it into a society that is not receptive to it."

#### 3. Planning, research, and development:

In this section, Davari presents six perspectives on the relation between research and development and demonstrates that development planning, without a transformation in a society's understanding and horizon, yields no result; for planning is not merely technical but contingent on what a society desires and what possibilities have been disclosed to it.

#### 4. The section of development dialogues:

The dialogue section of the book is where Davari speaks without self-constraint. The fifth section of the book, as well, is the quintessence of four extensive sessions in which prominent critics — including Beheshti, Tabatabaei, Shariati, and others — confronted Davari.

This section may be the most engaging for readers, for in these sessions, Davari:

- talks more simply and without affectation,
- narrates his lived experience in dealing with the Revolution, the university, intellectuals, and politics,
- and speaks of his own errors.

For example, he repeatedly emphasizes that his conception of "the distinct Iranian path" was erroneous and declares: "I had no right to suppose that we might proceed upon another path without historical prerequisites." These admissions constitute part of the narrative allure of the book, for they reveal the portrait of a transformed, sincere,

and unpretentious philosopher.

But why is this book significant?

This book is not merely an analysis of Davari's thought; it is a mirror through which one may behold the problem of Iran's development. Three fundamental reasons for its importance are:

#### 1. It examines the problem at its root:

it begins neither from economics nor from politics; it begins from "our understanding of the world".

#### 2. Davari's transformation is our transformation:

the path he traversed in 50 years — from the delusion of "another path" to the comprehension of the necessity of development — is the same path in which Iranian society remains disoriented.

#### 3. The dialogues are a document of an important moment:

few books in Iran contain a philosopher at the age of 85 who sits for four sessions with dozens of critics to speak about development.

#### An invitation to reconsideration

The Account of Reza is not merely the exposition of a theory; it is an invitation to reconsider the past and the future of Iran. In this account, Davari states that if we desire development, we must possess the will and yearning for it. We must transcend the level of imitation of Western externalities and attain the profundity of its relation. And this is achievable only through understanding, dialogue, and the acceptance of historical realities.

Ultimately, the book seeks to ask: Do we desire to become developed? And if our answer is affirmative, what must we alter within ourselves? This is the question with which Davari lived for many years — and which, thanks to this book, he has now shared with us.



People walk past a mural of an imagined banknote on a street in Tehran, Iran. The text on the mural reads, "The credibility [of Iran's rial] is dependent on the wills."

● TASNIM



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