



BĀBOL I. THE TOWN

i. The Town

town in Māzandarān, formerly Bārforūš; Bābol lies near the Bābol river, occupying a central position in the coastal plain. It was at first a small, local market-place, as indicated by the name Bārforūš (lit. [place where] loads are sold) which it bore until 1927. The settlement developed in early Safavid times on the site of the old town of Māmṭīr, and was favored by Shah 'Abbās who built a garden there, Bāḡ-e Šāh or Bāḡ-e Eram. It nevertheless remained little more than a village till the beginning of the Qajar period. Pietro della Valle, writing in 1627, mentions it only as a village. Its growth began in the eighteenth century as a result of population increase in the Caspian plain and gained strength, particularly in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, from the rise of Russian trade with the Caspian coastlands (by the late nineteenth century Russia had a resident commercial consul there). In 1822 J. B. Fraser found Bārforūš very active and comparable in size to Isfahan, with a population which he estimated at 70,000. Thanks to its centrality on the plain and, above all, to its accessibility from the sea (the Bābol river being navigable by small craft), Bārforūš grew rapidly in the nineteenth century, thus becoming the chief commercial center of Māzandarān, exporting rice, cotton, silk, and timber, importing factory-made goods, and acting as the hub of modernization in the province. For several short spells it was also the seat of the provincial administration. After a sharp drop in the 1830s due to plague, the population recovered to 30-40,000 in the rest of the nineteenth century and the first quarter of the twentieth century, making it Māzandarān's biggest



town in that period. Its links with the outside world may perhaps explain why the population at the start of the twentieth century included a relatively large number of Bahais and approximately 750 Jews.

During the Pahlavi period the town, renamed Bābol, grew much more slowly than the other towns in the region. It did not lie on the Trans-Iranian railroad, did not benefit much from Reżā Shah's promotion of modern industries, and had gradually lost its role in long-distance trade. Since then its commercial radius has been limited to the regional market. It was still the biggest town in the eastern part of the Caspian lowland at the time of the 1956 census, when it had 36,000 inhabitants, but in 1976 it was surpassed by Gorgān, Sārī, and Āmol, and ten years later probably also by Šāhī (new Qā'emšahr). The censuses show that Bābol's population grew from 49,973 in 1966 to 69,790 in 1976, i.e., at an annual rate of 3.1 percent which barely exceeded the natural demographic increase; also that the proportion of its inhabitants born in other provinces was the smallest of any town of the Caspian region. This relative stagnation might have been remedied if the revolution of 1979 had not put an end to the project for a university of Māzandarān at Bābol. The town has kept a traditional appearance, particularly evident in the bazaar with its many intact warehouses (*kāns*) of the Qajar period and fine vaulted section not to be found elsewhere in the region.

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