



# GĪLĀN I. GEOGRAPHY AND ETHNOGRAPHY

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## GĪLĀN

### i. Geography and Ethnography

*Physical Geography* (Figure 1). Gilān includes the northwestern end of the Alborz chain and the western part of the Caspian lowlands of Persia. The mountainous belt is cut through by the deep transversal valley of the Safidrūd between Manjīl and Emānzāda Hāšem near Rašt. To the northwest, the Ṭāleš highlands stretch a continuous watershed separating Gilān and Azarbaijan. Except at their northern end, where the Ḥayrān pass at the top of the Āstārāčāy valley does not exceed 1600 m, they are over 2000 m high, with three spots over 3000 m, the Bāqrow Dāg (3197 m), the ‘Ajam Dāg (3009 m), and the Šāh Mo‘allam or Māsūla Dāg (3050 m). Their eastern and northeastern side is deeply carved by parallel streams flowing down towards the Caspian, resulting in a comb-shaped pattern. The western Alborz itself, to the east of the Safidrūd valley, is wider and more intricate, with three parallel (WNW-ESE) ranges; the southernmost and lowest one is represented in Gilān by the Āsmān-sarā Kūh (2375 m) in the ‘Ammārlū district; the medium one is the most continuous, from the Kūh-e Dalfak (2711 m) to the Keram Kūh (3389 m),



whereas the transversal valley of Polrūd clearly divides the northern range into Kūh-e Nāteš (2387 m) and Kūh-e Somām or Somāmūs, the highest spot of Gīlān (3689 m). All these mountains have a very complicated geological structure and tectonic history which connects them to the structural complex of central Persia (Stöcklin). Continuing orogenic activity is attested by the relatively high seismicity; the earthquake of 20 June 1990 almost destroyed the two towns of Manjīl and Rūdbār, killed some forty thousand people and damaged several hundreds of villages.

Though all those mountains cover a greater area than the plains, these are the most specific feature of the province, and locally, the word Gīlān often refers to the plain areas or particularly to the central plain. This large parallelogram of lowlands, 35 km wide and 90 km long, is heterogenous and can be divided into two main parts: the delta of the Safīdrūd in the east and the Fūmanāt plain in the west. The former has been entirely built by the Safīdrūd, a river with a high discharge (450 millions m<sup>3</sup> in average) and a high alluvial content. The higher part is made out of coarse ancient alluvial material, whereas in the lower part, north of Āstāna, the river often changed its course through thin silty and clayey material; it has thus abandoned its former northeastward course, which flowed into the sea at the prominent angle of the plain near Dastak, and presently flows northwards and builds a smaller living delta jutting out into the Caspian between Zibā Kenār and Bandar Kīā Šahr (formerly Ḥasan Kīāda and Bandar Faraḥnāz during the 1970s). The Fūmanāt plain to the west intermingles marine alluvial deposits and former sandy beachlines with abundant alluvial deposits from the numerous rivers draining the southern part of Ṭāleš highlands. They do not reach directly the sea, but converge into the lagoon (*mordāb*) of Anzalī (q.v.) with a single outlet to the Caspian through the dune-covered sandy coastline. The lagoon is constantly getting smaller and shallower under the effect of silting. On the contrary, the streams of northern Ṭāleš and eastern Gīlān, even the more abundant Polrūd, do not bring alluvium enough to counterbalance the action of a coastal current going eastward, and thus could not build more than a narrow ribbon of lowlands, only a few kilometers wide between Āstārā and Safīdrūd and to the east of Qāsemābād, and some 10 km wide at the mouth of the Polrūd around Kalāčāy.

*Climate and vegetation.* The topographic position of the Caspian lowlands results in a very characteristic “Hyrcanian” climate, and the whole province of Gīlān belongs to this exceptionally humid and green area (Adle; Djavadi;



Ganji): Prevailing north-south atmospheric currents, humidified over the Caspian, are forced to a vigorous ascendancy by the mighty barrier of Alborz and thus pour all around the year abundant rainfall on both the plain and the northwestern slope of the mountains. The precipitation regime shows a sharp maximum in autumn (September to December), when atmospheric instability is at its highest point, medium values in winter and early spring, and lowest (but generally abundant enough to remain over the limit of “dry months”) values from May to August. Mean annual rainfall varies between 1200 and 1800 mm along the shoreline (1233 mm in Āstārā, 1755 in Anzalī), decreases towards a subhumid area in the southwestern corner of the plain (1086 mm in Fūman and 885 mm in Šāndarman), and reaches again very high amounts in the lower part of the mountain, up to 1500-1800 m (2400 mm in the upper Māsāl valley). Along the Safīdrūd valley, swept every afternoon in summer by the violent northerly “Manjīl wind” (Tholozan), a very rapid transition leads to the Mediterranean-like semi-arid area of Rūdbār and Manjīl (366 mm).

The climatic privilege of Gīlān explains its luxuriant natural vegetation. This Hyrcanian botanical region has specific features with regard to the Euro-Siberian territory, and even inside the Euxino-Hyrcanian botanical province (Bobek, pp. 16-21; Mobayen and Tregubov; Zohary, pp. 21-30): the almost complete absence of conifers, but very sparse yew-trees (*sork-dār*), and the great number of endemic species which have survived from the Arcto-Tertiary flora. According to altitude, three forest levels can be distinguished: the Hyrcanian mixed forests, the mountain beech forest, and the high mountain oak and hornbeam forest. The Hyrcanian forest *stricto sensu* once covered the plains, where only residual patches remain on coarse alluvial terraces between cultivated areas, and still covers the greater part of the first slopes of the mountains up to about 1000 m. It is a stratified forest, with a layer of very tall trees such as the endemic chestnut-leaved oak (*boland-māzū*; *Quercus castaneaefolia*), Siberian elm (*derakt-e āzād*; *Zelkova crenata*) and iron tree (*anjīlī*; *Parrotia persica*) and more common elms, maples, and hornbeams (*ūlas*); a layer of smaller trees like the endemic *Gleditchia caspica* (*līlakī*), *Diospyros lotus* (*kalhū*), and *Albizzia julibrissin* (*šabkosb*), boxwood (*šemsād*) in shady spots and all kinds of wild fruit trees; and an underwood with evergreen bushes such as *Prunus laurocerasus* (*jal*) and holly (*kās*), moss, wild vine, ivy, and other creeping plants. Medium altitude mountains are the realm of the lofty oriental beech (*rāš*; *Fagus orientalis*), associated with oaks (*balūt*), lime-trees (*namdār*), maples (*afra*), and elms (*nārvan*; qq.v.). The upper mountain level, between 1800 and 2200 m, has remnants of a quite poorer



forest of stunted oaks (*ūrī*; *Quercus macranthera*) and hornbeams (*Carpinus orientalis*). Alpine meadows, climatic at higher altitudes, have often replaced these upper mountain forests, some of them, on highest ridges or sheltered slopes, show distinctly xerophytic features. The so-called Mediterranean island around Rūdbār and Manjīl is conspicuous through its specific vegetation, natural as well as cultivated, i.e., its very sparse cypress (q.v.) forests and its olive-groves.

*Administrative boundaries and divisions* (Figure 2). In the late Qajar period (Rabino, 1915-16, pp. 57-58; tr. pp. 53-54), Gīlān was divided into nineteen districts; the larger districts, such as Mavāzī, which had recently united the four districts of Rašt, Kohdom, Kūčēṣfahān, and Ḳoškvejār, included several sub-districts (*bolūks*). Around 1950 (Razmārā, *Farhang* II), Gīlān was the main part of the so-called first province (*ostān-e yakom*), which included also two parts of the former Erāq-e ‘Ajām (q.v.), the *šahrestāns* of Zanjān and Arāk, and was divided into five *šahrestāns* of Ṭavāleš, Fūman, Bandar-e Pahlavī (Anzalī), Rašt, and Lāhījān. In 1963 it was separated from Zanjān and Arāk and completed by the small *šahrestān* of Āstārā in the north, and thus took its present size and boundaries, with an area of 14,709 km<sup>2</sup>. It was divided into ten *šahrestāns*: Āstārā, Ṭavāleš, Ṣawma‘a-sarā, Fūman, Bandar-e Pahlavī, Rašt, Rūdbār, Lāhījān, Langarūd, and Rūdsar. The only ulterior change in the administrative map was the accession of the *baḳš* of Āstāna, until then bound to Lāhījān, to the rank of *šahrestān* before the 1986 census. *Population*. Gīlān is the most densely populated province in Persia after the Tehran province, with 2,081,037 inhabitants in 1986 (141 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>) and has a marked ethnic personality. Its main ethnic groups belong all to the northwestern branch of the Iranian linguistic group (Bazin and Bromberger, pp. 13-14 and map 3). The most important one is the Gīlak, who live in the central plain, the eastern coastal fringe and the southeastern highlands. But both dialectal differences and socio-cultural features oblige to divide the Gīlak into three groups: the *raštī* and *lāhījānī* Gīlak, respectively in the western and the eastern part of the plain, show only slight differences, but the *gāleši* Gīlak or *deylamī* in the southwestern mountains have quite another language as well as an agropastoral way of life opposed to that of the Gīlak paddy-growers in the plain. On the western bank of the Safīdrūd, a similar contrast is to be seen between the Gīlak in the plain and the Ṭāleš whose area stretches from the piedmont to the ridge of the Alborz (q.v.). The *tātī* dialect is spoken around Rūdbār. Very few newcomers have settled more recently in the province: Kurdish buffalo herders scattered in the plain, the ‘Ammārlū Kurdish tribe



that has given its name to the district east of Rūdbār, Turkish traders and fishermen along the coast from Āstārā to Anzalī, and Persian employees of the state administrations. Thus, multilinguism is the rule throughout the province (Bazin and Bromberger).

As for religious affiliation, the bulk of the population belongs to the Shi'ite Muslim majority of Persia. A part of the Ṭāleš make out a significant Sunnite (Shafi'ite) minority in central and northern Ṭāleš (Bazin, 1980).

*Rural settlements and economic activities.* The whole plain has a very high rural density, mostly between 100 and 300 inhabitants/km<sup>2</sup>, and a characteristic pattern of settlement: the basic housing, economic, and social unit is not the village as in interior Persia but the *maḥalla*, a loose grouping of houses surrounded with gardens and orchards. The houses themselves (Bromberger 1974 and 1986a) are made out of several buildings with specific architecture and functions: the family house, stable, hen-house, paddy-barn, silkworm-nursery, tobacco-drying room, etc. Traditional buildings consist in a wooden frame filled with a mixture of loam and straw and are crowned with a steep hipped roof covered with thatch, rushes, or shingles. They are gradually replaced by more plain "modern" buildings of cement blocks covered with tiles or sheet-iron.

The main agricultural crop is by far rice (Rabino and Lafont; Sahami, pp. 50-59; Eškevari; Bazin, 1980, pp. 111-44). Nearly all the irrigable areas (more than 40 percent of the whole surface of the plain) are devoted to paddy fields. Traditional irrigation methods (channels derived from streams, springs, reservoirs) are still in use in western and eastern Gīlān, but have been replaced in the central Gīlān plain by a modern irrigation network using the water of the Safīdrūd. Stocked in the Manjīl reservoir dam, its water is then derived from the distribution dams of Tārīk and Sangar into the main distribution canals, the canal of Fūmanāt and the two canals of Sangar left bank and right bank, and thence to a full network of secondary and tertiary channels. Ploughing and raising borders is now mechanized through the use of Japan-made tillers, but transplanting seedlings, weeding, and harvesting remain manual operations, whereas traditional threshing and husking devices have been abandoned and replaced by threshing-machines and semi-industrial husking-plants. The greater part of the crop is commercialized towards the whole national Persian market.

If rice cultivation is omnipresent, it is generally complemented by other crops,



mostly pluvial crops grown around the *maḥalla* or on higher grounds unfit for irrigation. The only microregions where paddy is almost exclusive are the head of the Safīdrūd delta, between Rašt and Lašt-e Nešā, and the Ṭāleš Dūlāb district in central Ṭāleš. Everywhere else, one or two other crops have a significant position, and their relative importance differentiates the plains into smaller specialized areas. Growing mulberry (*tūt*) trees in order to breed silkworms in long specialized buildings called *telambār* is the most ancient activity, once more important than paddy cultivation. After a long period of decline, silk production has seen some renewal, with two main areas confined along the piedmont fringe: in western Gīlān from the Košābar valley to the Gašt valley, and in eastern Gīlān between Āstāna and Qāsemābād. Tea, though introduced later in Gīlān (in 1902, see ČĀY), is now the most important plantation crop, with its main areas around Lāhijān (Ehlers, 1970), where all the hills behind the piedmont have been turned into tea gardens, and in southern Fūmanāt. Tobacco is grown in lower (northwestern) Fūmanāt and central Ṭāleš, and fruit trees along the two coastal fringes, producing temperate fruit such as cherries and plums in northern Ṭāleš and citrus fruits (q.v.) in eastern Gīlān to the east of Kalāčāy.

Animal husbandry (Pour-Fickoui and Bazin) has a subordinate position all over the Gīlak *maḥalla* of the central plain, due to the lack of good pastureland. In the past almost every family used to own one or two cows to milk, an ox for ploughing, and a horse for transportation, but the last two have mostly been replaced by a small motor tiller. A few farmers have a significant number of cattle, which they send in summer to enclosed wet pastures (*qoroq*) on the bank of the Anzalī lagoon and smaller marshy areas, also used by specialized Kurdish buffalo-herders (Beyhaqī).

On the contrary, animal husbandry is one of the main income sources for the Ṭāleš and Gāleš inhabitants of the mountain belt. The Ṭāleš peasants living on the piedmont of the western range combine paddy-cultivation with pastoral life. In addition to the usual horse and cows, they own sheep and goats that spend the winter in nearby hills (*qešlāq*), and take all of them to one or several levels of summer pastures (*yeylāq* or *gīrīa*) in the mountain. The Ṭāleš range itself is sparsely populated; in central and northern Ṭāleš, the inhabitants of small hamlets on the lower slopes or more compact villages higher in the mountain grow some wheat and corn and raise cattle and sheep, whereas in southern Ṭāleš scattered families dwelling in wooden houses or huts live entirely upon their herds and flocks (Bazin, 1980, II, pp. 5-52).



In eastern Gīlān too, some inhabitants of the piedmont, such as citrus-growers of the easternmost districts, and most people in the interior raise cattle and sheep with various migration patterns between winter forest pastures and summer high mountain pastures. Wheat rainfed cultivation covers wide areas in the interior districts of Deylamān, ‘Ammārlū and Eškevarāt.

Thanks to its Mediterranean-like climate, the small area around Rūdbār and Manjīl has an agricultural system unique in Persia. Olive groves provide the main source of income, combined with wheat and animal husbandry, plus paddy fields along the Safīdrūd bed in the Rostamābād district downstream from Rūdbār.

Another activity specific to the Caspian, if not to Gīlān alone, is the sturgeon fisheries (*šīlāt*) along the coast (Carré; Rostami; Bazin, 1980, II, pp. 129-37; see also [FISHERIES AND FISHING](#)). They have always been a foreign body in the local economy: Initiated by the Russians, they were granted to a Russian firm under the Qājārs, then, from 1928-53, to an Irano-Soviet joint company and since 1953 to the state-owned *Šerkat-e sehāmī-e šīlāt-e Īrān*. Both the employees of the headquarters of the company in Gāzīān (eastern quarter of Anzalī) and the fishermen working in the small fisheries are mostly Azeri people, either from former Soviet Azarbaijan or from villages in the *šahrestān* of Ardabīl and Kalkāl adjacent to Gīlān. The latter come to Gīlān twice a year, during winter and early spring, and in late summer between harvest and sowing. The sturgeons caught in all the small fishing-stations are gathered in Gāzīān, where caviar (q.v.) is prepared. Although the consumption of sturgeon, as a scaleless fish, is prohibited (*ḥarām*) by Islam, production has been kept on after the Islamic Revolution, and Gīlān provides approximately the half of the Persian production of caviar (between 200 and 250 tons yearly in the 1980s) and sturgeon fish (between 1400 and 1700 tons). In addition to this highly specialized activity, some 26 fishing cooperative societies, employing both Gīlānī and Azeri fishermen, catch *ḥalāl* (legally authorized) scale-fish (between 4,000 and 6,000 tons).

*Industry, trade and urbanization.* Gīlān is one of the least urbanized provinces of Persia with only 37.7 percent of its population living in towns in 1986, due to its very high density of rural population and its relatively low level of industrialization. Actually, Gīlān has no significant mineral resources, and the bulk of its industrial plants process agricultural products: rice husking mills all over the plain, tea factories in Fūmanāt and Lāhījān, oil factories around Rūdbār, fish and caviar processing plant in Anzalī, and silk winding off plant,



tobacco factory, dairy products and beverages in Rašt. A huge complex was built in the mid-1970s to exploit another natural resource, the wood of the extensive forests of western Gīlān, the Čūkā(čūb “wood” and kāḡaz “paper”) company with a saw-mill in Ǫalīfa-ābād of Asālem and a paper-mill in Pūnel, in addition to smaller private saw-mills in southern Ṭāleš and eastern Gīlān (Bazin, 1980, p. 171). Besides this sector based on regional resources, the only noticeable industries are concentrated in Rašt.

Commercial activity is well developed with a very dense network of trading centers, much thicker than in interior Persia. Every *maḡalla* has its own grocer’s and coffee-shop, and above this basic level every small geographical unit has a *bāzār*, a commercial center with various shops and workshops and some services, often located along the main roads. But the most original feature of the plain of central Gīlān (as well as of central Māzandarān) is the number and flourishing activity of weekly markets (Thorpe), grouped in organized cycles (Kamioka). Urban centers associate a richer commercial structure, with several hundreds of shops and a beginning of functional segregation, and administrative activity as chief towns of *šahrestān*. Only two of them have a greater demographic and economic weight, Anzalī (q.v.) in the west and Lāhijān in the east, but stay far under the capital of the province Rašt, which dominates the urban life of Gīlān.

See also [ABRĪŠAM](#); [BERENJ](#); [ČĀY](#).

For a music sample, see [Prayer at the end of work](#).

For a music sample, see [Kara Bašimuna Nana](#).

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