



# GĪLĀN VI. HISTORY IN THE 18TH CENTURY

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The rapid decline of the Safavids in the first decades of the 18th century, leading to their ultimate demise in 1722, created a general state of chaos in the country. The northern regions of the country in particular became vulnerable to foreign influence and occupation. The first concerted efforts by czarist Russia to dominate the Caspian Sea and the Persian provinces of Gīlān, Māzandarān, and Astarābād, as well as Azarbaijan, began in the same era. This turbulent century also saw the rise to power of three powerful tribal leaders, Nāder Shah Afšār (1149-60/1736-47), Karīm Khan Zand (1164-93/1751-79), and Āqā Moḥammad Khan Qājār (1193-1211/1779-97). During most of this period, the history of Gīlān was marked by the rule of local chiefs who either governed independently or secured their relative independence through payments of tribute to the above mentioned rising figures and their assigned governor generals. The centuries old binary division in Gīlan of Bīa-pas and Bīa-pīš was also maintained in this period.

*Russian occupation of Gīlān.* Commercial and diplomatic relations between Russia and Persia began to develop during the 16th century, when the emerging Safavid and Muscovite empires became increasingly concerned with



foreign trade as an important source of government revenue. The opening of the Volga-Caspian route in the 1550s, secured through the conquest of the Tartar Khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan by Ivan the Terrible, marked the beginning of a new commercial route from western Europe to Persia via Russia. These early commercial interests were merged with the Russo-Persian political contacts, which were incited by the desire of a number of Georgian princes to seek Russian protection against the Persian and Ottoman empires that were competing for suzerainty over Georgia and Armenia (Cochan and Keep, pp. 39, 89; Kazemzadeh, pp. 239-44; Atkin, pp. 3-7).

Russia made its first determined attempt to occupy the southern Caspian provinces of Persia during the closing years of the reign of Peter the Great (r. 1696-1725). Having established Russia as a great European power, Peter had long aspired to control European trade with the Orient and turn the Caspian into a Russian sea. In 1127/1715, he sent an officer, Artemy Volinsky, to the court of Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn to evaluate the local situation and encourage greater commercial cooperation with Persia and expand Russian trade with India. An alliance with Persia against the Ottomans was also envisaged. Volinsky negotiated a treaty with the Persian court, allowing Russia to send consuls to Isfahan, Shirvan, and Rašt. Volinsky also reported that the Safavid Empire was on the verge of collapse and that the conquest of its northern provinces in the west and southern Caspian regions would pose little difficulty (Cochan and Keep, p. 88; Lockhart, 1958, pp. 103-4, 106, 108).

The pretext for the invasion of the Persian provinces was the serious damage done in 1133/1721 to the life and property of Russian merchants in Shirvan by Lezghian tribesmen, who were nominally subjects of the shah but were in constant revolt against the central government. Peter began his advances toward the southern shores of the Caspian in 1722 by mobilizing 100,000 soldiers and sailors at Astrakhan and occupied Darband (q.v.) in September of 1722. However, challenged by Ottoman advances in northwestern Persia, Peter retreated to Astrakhan for the winter. Meanwhile, the governor of Gīlān, fearing an imminent Afghan invasion of the province, sent an urgent message to Peter, requesting him to dispatch a Russian garrison to Rašt, the capital of the province, which was under siege by Zebardast Khan Afġān. Apparently, the governor's demand was in accord with the wish of the Safavid Shah Ṭahmāsb II, who had just assumed the crown and sent an envoy, Esmā'īl Beg, to sign a treaty of alliance and protection with Russia. In response, in early 1135/1723, the czar ordered two battalions of his regular soldiers under



Colonel Shipov to sail to Gīlān. When they arrived, the governor hesitated to give them permission to disembark. Eventually, welcomed neither by the governor nor by the people, the Russians settled in a caravansary near Rašt. Suffering a bombardment from the sea, Baku also surrendered in July of the same year. Esmā'īl Beg, Ṭahmāsb's envoy to Peter's court, was briefed to seek the czar's protection against the Afghan and Ottoman invaders. On his way he arrived in Rašt and was sent along by Shipov to Moscow before he had received fresh instructions from the shah who had by now changed his mind. Reversing his previous policy, Ṭahmāsb sent a message to Shipov and the governor of Gīlān demanding the immediate withdrawal of Russian troops from Persian soil. The governor mobilized some 15,000 untrained and inadequately armed troops, levied mostly from peasantry, to besiege the Russian garrison. Coming under heavy fire from the Russian defense, they were forced to disperse with some 1,000 casualties. After this clash Peter sent four battalions of regular troops under Brigadier Levashev to replace Shipov. He arrived in September of 1723 and quelled the opposition of the people (Astarābādī, pp. 3, 8-9, 16-17; Kāzemzādeh, pp. 244-45; Rabino, 1917, pp. 463-65; Lockhart, 1958, pp. 108, 176, 178, 238-50).

Unaware of reversals in Persian policy and Ṭahmāsb's new moves, Esmā'īl Beg signed a treaty of alliance on 24 Du'l-ḥejja 1135/23 September 1723, which ceded to Russia Gīlān, Māzandarān, and Astarābād as well as Ṭāleš, Baku, and Darband. Consequently, the czar officially appointed General Levashev governor of Gīlān. In 1139/1727 the Russian governor defeated the Afghan forces of Ašraf, who had made advances into Gīlān and started negotiations with the commander of the Afghans, Moḥammad Saydal Khan, resulting in an accord between Saydal and Levashev in Rašt in Rajab 1141/February 1729. According to its terms, Ašraf consented to cede further the region of Rūdbār to the Russian government in return for the recognition of his sovereignty over Persia. But the treaty became a dead letter when Nāder made his advances toward Isfahan and forced Ašraf to flee from the capital. Ašraf was killed on his way to Qandahār (Astarābādī, pp. 16-18, 95-108, 182-85, 212; Lockhart, 1958, pp. 295-97, 328-40).

In 1145/1728, Zaynal b. Ebrāhīm, a dervish or *qalandar* from Lāhījān, assumed the princely title of Esmā'īl Mirzā, claiming to be a son of Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn. Having won over a large number of hardy mountaineers from Deylam, he occupied Deylamān, Rānekūh, and Māsūla and began to endanger the interests of all the interested parties in the area: Ṭahmāsb, the Russians, and the



Ottomans alike. Defeated by the followers of Ṭahmāsb, he encountered Russian forces who in turn drove them to the Ottoman occupied area in eastern Azarbaijan. There his forces were routed by the Ottomans and Zaynal was killed (Astarābādī, pp. 24-25; Lockhart, 1958, p. 302).

After the death of Peter in 1725, Russian forces remained in Gīlān until 1734, when they had to evacuate Gīlān and all other Persian provinces owing to a number of factors including the rise of Nāder Khan (later Nāder Shah) to power, severe casualties from disease, depleting their army by half, as well as increasing internal problems at home. Two treaties were negotiated, the treaty of Rašt in Ša‘bān 1144/February 1732 anticipating the evacuation, which occurred in 1734, and the treaty of Ganja in Šawwāl 1147/March 1735, recognizing the return of all provinces that were occupied by Peter (Astarābādī, pp. 228, 246-47; Lockhart, 1958, pp. 345-50; Kazemzadeh, pp. 244-45; Bennigsen, pp. 311-18).

*Governors of Gīlān.* In much of the 18th-century Gīlān was ruled by the descendents of Eshāqīya rulers and more specifically Amīra Dobbāj of Fūman and Bīa-pas (see GİLĀN v) independently or semi-independently, with the help of county and district governors who were also from local clans. In this period a number of governor generals were also assigned to Gīlān by Nāder Shah, Karīm Khan, and Āqā Moḥammad Khan. But their terms were often short lived (for a treatment of local rulers of Gīlān and the governor generals assigned to the province by the central authority, see Rabino, 1917, p. 472; idem, 1918; idem, 1920). During the reign of Nāder Shah, Gīlān’s local governors submitted the assigned tributes to the governor generals or the shah’s treasury. However, excessive taxation led to two major riots, one starting from Ṭāleš in 1157/1744 which lasted for two years, and the other one emanating from Gaskar in 1159/1746 which continued to 1160/1747 when Nāder was killed (Aronova and Ashrafyan, pp. 202-4; *Gīlān-nāma*, pp. 101-2).

An important move in this period was the attempt made by Nāder Shah to create a Persian naval force in the Caspian Sea. To this end he assigned the Englishman John Elton (q.v.) to establish a shipyard in Anzalī and granted him the title Jamāl Beg. Elton, who had already built two ships at Qāzān on the river Volga, was ordered by the shah to survey the eastern shores of the Caspian. Jamāl Beg succeeded to build a vessel with the capacity for twenty canons, which was reportedly superior to the Russian ships in the Caspian (Rabino, 1917, pp. 469-70).



In the anarchy following the murder of Nāder Shah, his dominions were taken over by tribal chieftains. In Gilān, in 1162/1749, Āqā Jamāl Fūmanī (a descendent of Amīra Dobbāj and the son of Āqā Kamāl, who was governor of Gilān during Shah Solṭān Ḥosayn's reign) together with a certain Āqā Ṣafi', defied the central authority and took over the rule of the province from Rašt. During the struggle between the Zands and the Qajars, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Qājār, the father of Āqā Moḥammad Khan (q.v.), secured Gilān in 1165/1752 and married the daughter of Āqā Jamāl Fūmanī. Āqā Jamāl was killed in 1167/1753 in Šaft by Āqā Hādī Šaftī as part of an already mentioned old feud which continued into the last decade of 18th century. Āqā Hādī ruled Gilān with the help of Mīrzā Zakī, governor of Gaskar, for only four months. He was captured and executed in a surprise attack by the Qajar chieftain, who installed Ḥājī Jamāl's young son, Hedāyat-Allāh, as governor of Rašt (Golestāna, pp. 350-51; Rabino, 1917, p. 473; idem, 1918, p. 98; Gmèlin I, pp. 417-18; Perry, pp. 207-8).

During the rise of Karīm Khan Zand, Hedāyat-Allāh Khan was summoned to Tehran and was replaced by a confidant of Karīm Khan in 1173/1760. But when Karīm Khan was in Azarbaijan on a military campaign, Hedāyat-Allāh fled to Gilān and reinstated himself as the governor of the province. Soon Karīm Khan had him arrested and fined 12,000 tomans, and Naẓar-'Alī Khan Zand was sent to supervise the government of Gilān. Later, Karīm Khan changed his policy towards Hedāyat-Allāh again, appointing him as the governor of Gilān in 1181/1767 and arranging the marriage of Hedāyat-Allāh's sister to his son Abu'l-Faṭḥ Khan (Ġaffārī, pp. 198-99; Gmèlin, pp. 164-65; Perry, pp. 207-8; 251-52; see also Rostam-al-Ḥokamā', pp. 371-72; 442-43, for slightly different versions of anecdotal accounts of the revolts by Hedāyat-Allāh and his marital relation with the Zand dynasty).

Hedāyat-Allāh was able to preserve Gilān's semi-independence until the rise to power of Āqā Moḥammad Khan in the 1770s. As early as 1186/1773, he tried to seek Russian protection, and when this proved unsuccessful, he turned to Faṭḥ-'Alī Khan of the Qobba Khanate for help in 1193/1779. In his endeavors to re-establish a centralized authority, Āqā Moḥammad Khan entrusted his brother Mortazāqolī Khan with the conquest of Gilān in 1781. Faced with the possibility of an imminent invasion and a humiliating defeat, Hedāyat-Allāh dispatched two local notables, Mīrzā Ṣādeq Monajjem-bāšī (the chief astrologer) and Moḥammad-Ṣāleḥ Lāhījī to the Qajar court along with valuable gifts. Consequently, the shah recalled Mortazāqolī Khan and his troops from



Gilân (Sepehr, pp. 23). Continuing the family feud, he had Āqā Rafī Šaftī and his five brothers and nephews executed. Hedāyat-Allāh's desire to maintain some measure of independence led him to seek protection again from the Russians as his last act of defiance against the rising Qajar ruler in 1201/1787. However, his refusal to agree to the Russian demands for the cession of the port of Anzalī, induced the Russian agents to encourage Āqā Moḥammad Khan to conquer the province. Commanding 6,000 soldiers, Moṣṭafā Khan Davallū marched to Rašt and defeated Hedāyat-Allāh. When he took asylum in a Russian ship, the Russians turned him to Āqā 'Alī, the only survivor of the Āqā Rafī Šaftī's clan who had all been killed by Hedāyat-Allāh. He was executed by Āqā 'Alī (for different versions of his last confrontation with the Qajars and his death see Sepehr, p. 28; Rabino, 1918, p. 98; Atkin, pp. 34-35; Perry, p. 209).

Gilân prospered under Hedāyat-Allāh, who promoted foreign trade by attracting a large number of Armenians, Russians, Jews, and Indians to Rašt. They lived and conducted trade in separate caravansaries. Ruling for a long period over one of the most prosperous provinces of Persia with a substantial annual revenue (about £200,000), he accumulated a handsome fortune and lived a lavish life. He sent a large tribute of silk and gold to the rulers from Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan to Karīm Khan to Āqā Moḥammad Khan. "He maintained a brilliant court, well furnished with strong liquor and Georgian slaves, and a salaried standing army of fifteen hundred men, which he could augment to ten thousand with provincial levies. As well as his revenue from the rich local produce, specially silk, he derived profit from the poll tax on the large Armenian community and from trade with the Russians, who kept a fortified trading post at Anzali" (Perry, p. 208; see also Rabino, 1917, pp. 475-76; Forster, I, p. 219; Gmèlin I, pp. 418-20).

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