



GORGĀN VII. HISTORY FROM THE SAFAVIDS TO THE END OF THE PAHLAVI ERA

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Two characteristics dominated the history of Gorgān in the period between the 16th and early 19th centuries: incessant tribal unrest and power politics. These features reflected the rather particular tribal structure and the geopolitical situation of this region and its neighboring areas in the north and east. Coveted by the Uzbeks and claimed by the Turkmans, this fertile region was the scene of agitation and struggle for dominance. The Uzbeks were driven out by the Safavids, but the Turkmans showed little willingness to submit to the authority of the central government. The central government, in turn, usually failed to follow a coherent policy and thus further aggravated the climate of insecurity. Tribal wars, invasions, and retaliations followed each other incessantly; they were, it seems, occasionally interrupted by periods of relative peace and prosperity. In fact, the economic potential of Gorgān, as well as its strategic position, made it a very attractive prize. Shah 'Abbās saw the need for some readjustment in the delicate tribal balance of power in the region, and the arrival of the Qajars marked a turning point. Henceforth, the Qajars played a decisive role in all major events in Gorgān from the early 17th



century onwards. The Russians under Peter the Great, however, also had territorial ambitions in the region in order to advance their commerce and during the decline of the Safavids in the early 18th century seized the first opportunity to occupy Gorgān and establish a trading post there for a short period. With so many factors at work, the central government had a delicate task, and Gorgān became a stage for power politics and fluctuating fortunes. It was not until the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution in Russia and the establishment of a strong central government in Persia in the 1920s-30s that the situation in Gorgān was finally stabilized.

FROM THE SAFAVIDS TO THE QAJARS

After Shah Esmā'il I came to the throne and established the Safavid dynasty, with the strengthening of the central government, more attention was paid to the north of Khorasan and the southern shores of the Caspian Sea, especially Gorgān/Esterābād/Astarābād (q.v.). These regions were under a constant threat of invasion by the Uzbeks and there was little government authority. In a battle in 906/1501, Shah Esmā'il's forces defeated the Uzbeks and conquered Khorasan (Montazer-e Šāheb, ed., pp. 260-64; Šokri, ed., pp. 368-69; Qomi, I, pp. 101, 109, 112-13). The central government also took steps to establish its authority in Astarābād and appointed a governor (Montazer-e Šāheb, ed., pp. 317-19). In 920/1514, one of the descendants of Solṭān Ḥosayn Bāyqarā, a certain Moḥammad-Zamān b. Badi'-al-Zamān, profited from the central government's preoccupation with the war with the Ottoman Empire and seized the fortress at Astarābād. The central government, however, soon re-established order and appointed a new governor (Wāleh Ešfahāni, pp. 244-45).

At the outset of Shah Ṭahmāsb I's reign (930-84/1524-76), Khorasan once again became the scene of unrest. In 932/1525-26, Uzbek forces under 'Obayd-Allāh Khan invaded Ṭus, and in 934/1527-28 turned to Astarābād. Zaynal Khan, the governor of Astarābād, could not resist the invading forces and the city fell to the Uzbeks; thereupon 'Obayd-Allāh Khan made his son, 'Abd-al-'Aziz Solṭān, governor of Astarābād (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 51-52; Wāleh Ešfahāni, pp. 341-44). The struggle between Shah Ṭahmāsb's forces and the Uzbek invaders continued in 935/1529 and 936/1530 and the city changed hands several times. The economy of the region suffered enormously and, as a result, in 937/1531, Shah Ṭahmāsb decided to devalue the *šāhi* copper coins struck in Astarābād. According to a rock inscription of the period, the people of Astarābād requested the king to change his mind and the king consented.



‘Obayd-Allāh Khan’s ambitions, however, were not diminished, and once again, in 938/1531-32, he attacked Khorasan and sent Qameš Oġlān to plunder Astarābād. The Uzbeks took the city and, a year later, Shah Ṭah-māsb sent an army under Alqās Mirzā and Bader Khan Ostājlu to evict them, which they did. The Safavid army’s counter-attack against the Uzbeks continued in 942/1535-36 and 943/1536-37 (Eskandar Beg, I, pp. 59, 61, 63, 65).

Between 944/1537-38 and 947/1540-41, waves of political and social unrest followed as Shah Ṭahmāsb’s forces were engaged in repeated battles for the control of Astarābād, first against the Uzbeks and later against the Turkman tribes. During this period control of Astarābād changed hands many times, and attempts at a conciliatory stance between the sides, with a view to a lasting peace, repeatedly failed (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 106-8; Ḥo-sayni Astarābādi, p. 80).

During Solṭān Moḥammad Ḳodā-banda’s reign (985-96/1578-88), Astarābād was once again the scene of turmoil. His first action was to appoint a new governor, but the situation was so critical and the rebellious Turkman tribes had become so aggressive that the governor was forced to seek refuge in the fortress of Mobārakābād (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 227).

The situation was no better in the early years of the reign of Shah ‘Abbās I (986-1038/1588-1639). Various Turkman tribes, especially the Ṣāyen-kānis, had destroyed the fortress of Mobārakābād and each rebellious tribe had built its own fortress. Shah ‘Abbās was aware of the friendly relations between ‘Abd-Allāh Khan Uz-bek, the conqueror of Ḳvārazm, and the Ṣāyen-kāni tribe and consequently judged it prudent to come to terms with ‘Alyār Beg Imur, the Ṣāyen-kāni chieftain. Thereupon, he appointed ‘Alyār Beg as the new governor (Eskandar Beg, I, p. 530). Despite the fact that some tribes refused to obey the new governor, the situation was to a great extent stabilized in the region.

A most significant event in the history of Gorgān occurred when Shah ‘Abbās I, alarmed by the the growing strength of the Uzbek and Turkman tribes in the northeast, decided to divide the Qajar tribe, locating the majority of them in Gorgān and northern Khorasan. From this point, the history of Gorgān is intimately connected with the history of the Qajars.

It was also during the reign of Shah ‘Abbās that Astarābād was for the first time recognized as a province (*eyālat*) and its center was called by the same name. There was relative stability and prosperity in the region, partly, no



doubt, because of Shah ‘Abbās’s several trips to the region (Jalāl-al-Din Monajjem, pp. 141, 189).

During the second year of Shah Şafi’s reign (1038-52/1629-42), however, the country fell into disorder and Astarābād became once again the scene of rioting by the Turkman tribes (Ḥosayni Eşfahāni, p. 75). Disorder and rebellion continued in Astarābād during the reign of Shah ‘Abbās II, when more Turkman uprising were reported (Waḥid Qazvini, p. 201); otherwise, apart from some epigraphic evidence dealing with economic questions, we have little local information for the period. In Moḥarram 1077/July 1666, Shah ‘Abbās II issued a decree exempting many Astarābād craftsmen and farmers from paying various taxes and duties levied on them by most bailiffs (*dāruġa*) and magistrates (*kalāntar*) under such pretexts as night watch, road safety, etc. It also reaffirmed the validity of previous tax exemption decrees of 961/1554, 990/1582, 1045/1635-36, and 1057/1647 and assigned Ja‘far Khan Beglerbegi to carry them out (Ḍabiḥi and Sotuda, VI, pp. 31-36).

There were also rebellions, invasion, and plunder by Turkman tribes during Shah Solaymān Şafawi’s rule (1077-105/1666-94; Hedāyat, *Rawżat al-şafā’* VIII, pp. 485-86). According to a rock inscription from his reign dated Şa‘bān 1102/May 1691, he issued a decree to appease the Guklān tribe (q.v.), who had been unjustly treated (Ḍabiḥi and Sotuda, VI, pp. 52-53).

Our information about the situation of Astarābād in the early part of Shah Solţān-Ḥosayn Şafawi’s reign (1105-135/1694-1722) is based on a number of economic decrees and documents for the years 1108/1696-97, 1114/1702-703 and 1123/1711. In this period *soyurġāl* (see eqţā’), or granting of land and titles to courtiers by royal decree, was in practice (see Ḍabiḥi and Sotuda, VI, pp. 55, 81-82, 85, 453-78).

With the decline of the Safavid government, anarchy and disorder gained grounds in all provinces and a number of claimants rose in Astarābād. Meanwhile, the struggle for power between the Şāyen-kāni Turkmans and Yomut tribe added more fuel to the fire in the southeastern shores of the Caspian Sea (Marvi, pp. 10, 52; Estrābādi, p. 8).

The rapid decline of the Safavids in the first decades of the 18th century leading to their ultimate demise in 1722, when Afghan tribes occupied Isfahan, created a general state of chaos in the country. The southern Caspian provinces of Gīlān, Māzandarān and Gorgān in particular became vulnerable



to foreign influence and occupation. In 1723, the Russian czar, Peter the Great (r. 1696-1725), ordered two battalions of his regular soldiers under Colonel Shipov and another four battalions under Brigadier Levashev to invade Gilān, Māzandarān, and Gorgān. Levashev arrived in September of 1723 and quelled local opposition and sent a contingent to Astarābād to establish a trading post (Estrābādī, pp. 3, 8-9, 16-17; Rabino, pp. 463-65; Lockhart, pp. 108, 176, 178, 238-50). Meanwhile Esmā'īl Beg, the Persian envoy to Peter's court, signed a treaty of alliance on 24 Ḍu'l-ḥejja 1135/23 September 1723, which ceded to Russia Gilān, Māzandarān, and Astarābād (Waḥid Māzandarāni, ed., pp. 82-83). Consequently, the czar officially appointed General Levashev governor of Gilān, Māzandarān and Astarābād. After the death of Peter in 1725, Russian forces remained in the region until 1734, when Nāderqoli Khan (later Nāder Shah) forced them out of all Persian provinces. Two treaties were negotiated, the treaty of Rašt in February 1732 anticipating the evacuation, which occurred in 1734, and the treaty of Ganja in March 1735, recognizing the return of all provinces that were occupied by Peter (Estrābādī, pp. 228, 246-47; Lockhart, pp. 345-50; for an account of Russian invasion, see further gilān iv).

In the meantime, Asatrābād's strategic position and availability of armed soldiers (Marvi, I, p. 222) attracted the attention of Shah Ṭahmāsb II as a potential bulwark against the invading Afghan forces. However, his 1137/1725 demand for help was unheeded by the forces in Astarābād, and in 1140/1727-28 he balefully reproached Beglerbegi Astarābādi for the indifference of Qajar soldiers in the face of foreign invasion (Ḍabiḥi and Sotuda, VI, pp. 89, 95-97). Eventually Fath-'Ali Khan Qājār (q.v.), the governor of Astarābād, who had previously participated in the defense of Isfahan against the Afghans under Shah Solṭān-Ḥosayn, but, disenchanted with the hypocrisy of the courtiers, had returned to Astarābād, responded positively to Ṭahmāsb Mirzā (Marvi, I, pp. 27-28; Sāravi, p. 29; E'tezād-al-Salṭana, p. 10). Thereupon, Ṭahmāsb Mirzā headed for Astarābād (Estrābādī, pp. 84-87; Marvi, pp. 48, 64) and appointed Fath-'Ali Khan as governor of Semnān and assigned him the task of repelling the Afghans. This underlined Fath-'Ali Khan as the real power in Ṭahmāsb Mirzā's camp (Hambly, p. 108). Ṭahmāsb also appointed Allāḥqoli Khan Qājār as governor of Astarābād.

Later, when Nāderqoli and Ṭahmāsb Mirzā were united, the former appointed Raḥim Khan Gerāyli governor of Astarābād (Hambly, pp. 84-87). The struggle between the two governors of Astarābād disguised the struggle for power between Nāderqoli and Ṭahmāsb Mirzā. Nāder led an expedition to Astarābād



and helped Raḥim Khan Gerāyli triumph (Hambly, pp. 84-87). In 1140/1727, having subdued ʿDu'l-Faqār Khan the governor of Māzandarān, Nāder turned to Astarābād and crushed the rebellion of the Yomut tribe (Marvi, I, pp. 90-92). In 1143 and 1144, time and again various Turkman tribes rose in rebellion around Astarābād and Nāder put them down (Marvi, pp. 227-28, 912-14; Estrābādi, p. 8; Hedāyat, 1994, p. 257).

The quarrel between Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Qājār, son of Faṭḥ-'Ali Khan, with the governor, Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Qājār, who was a protégé of Nāder, led to a number of clashes in Astarābād, in which the former availed himself of the help of the Turkman tribes, especially the Yomuts (Marvi, pp. 912-14). The Turkmans were dissatisfied with the governor chosen by Nāder, and his exorbitant taxes. Eventually, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan stormed the city and imprisoned the governor in the citadel (Marvi, pp. 959, 966). Agriculture and silkworm production suffered greatly, the countryside was gradually depopulated, and the region was ruined.

When Nāder heard the news of the insurrection, he ordered Behbud Khan Sardār Ātak and Sāru Khan to move from Khorasan to Astarābād. They took the city and Sāru Khan was given the task of establishing order in the region up to the banks of the Gorgān River (Marvi, pp. 962-65, 978; Estrābādi, p. 400), and Behbud Khan was appointed the military commander of the whole region. Shortly afterwards, there were disagreements between Sāru Khan and Moḥammad-Zamān Khan (Marvi, p. 1103). Turkman tribes remained unruly, but Nāder managed to keep them at bay and even integrate some of them into his own army (Estrābādi, pp. 421-22; Mar'āši, pp. 78-79; Marvi, p. 1137).

As Nāder Shah's reign drew to its end, disorder and rebellion returned to Astarābād (Estrābādi, pp. 421-22). When he was killed in 1160/1447, the struggle for power tore the country apart. In 1161/1148, Šāhroḡ Afšār, declared himself king in Khorasan, and in 1164/1750-51 Astarābād, Māzandarān, and Gilān fell under the domination of Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Qājār (Golestāna, pp. 204-5; Hedāyat, 1994, p. 261). In the struggle between Nāder's generals, Karim Khan Zand captured Isfahan and routed 'Ali-Mardān Khan, who was supported by Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Qājār. Subsequently, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan retreated to Astarābād's fortress. In 1165, Karim Khan laid siege to the fortress, but Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan rejected his peace proposals and defeated him with the help of Turkman tribes (Golestāna, pp. 210-15; Nāmi, pp. 27-29; Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 261; Sepehr, I, pp. 17-18).



Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan intended to expand his dominion. He led a successful expedition against Urmia in 1168-69/1755-56, and on his way back to Astarābād once more defeated the Zand army, which had intercepted him (Golestāna, pp. 316-17; Ġaffāri, pp. 57-59). In 1172/1758-59, in retaliation, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan led a military expedition to Isfahan, but found the city in ruins and, sensing disloyalty among his Afghan mercenaries, decided to retreat to Astarābād (Golestāna, 320-21; Nāmi, p. 88; Ġaffāri, p. 115). In his absence, however, Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Khan Qājār of Yukāribāš clan had taken possession of Astarābād, but in the ensuing clash, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan wrested it out of his hands (Ġaffāri, 88-89, 92-99). Shortly afterwards Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan was killed by Zand soldiers in Jomādā II, 1172/February 1759, and Karim Khan charged Shaikh 'Ali Khan with taking Astarābād and restoring order (Golestāna, pp. 321-22; Nāmi, pp. 87-88; Ġaffāri, pp. 107-9; Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 267-69).

Meanwhile, Karim Khan appointed Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Khan Qājār as governor of Astarābād (Golestāna, p. 321; Nāmi, 88; Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 267-69; Ġaffāri Kāšāni, p. 110). In 1173/1759-60, he sent his own brother, Zaki Khan Zand, at the head of a strong army to take over as the governor of Māzandarān and to establish order in Astarābād, which he did by quelling another rebellion by some Qajar tribesmen and Afghans until the end of the summer 1173/1760 (Golestāna, p. 322; Ġaffāri Kāšāni, pp. 124-25). The difficulties of Zand government in Astarābād essentially emanated from the Qajar tribes' unrest, which was aggravated by the death of Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan and the rise of his son, Āḡā Moḥammad Khan (q.v.), on the political scene. Clashes continued until 1177/1763-64, when Āḡā Moḥammad Khan and his brother, Ḥosaynqoli Khan Qājār, nicknamed Jahānsuz, were taken to Karim Khan in Shiraz (Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 270-72).

In 1183, Karim Khan appointed Ḥosaynqoli Khan Qājār governor of Dāmḡān, but antagonism between his clan and the Davallu clan continued and Astarābād became the target of repeated attacks. Eventually, in 1188/1774 he managed to extend his control to certain parts of Māzandarān and Astarābād. He was killed in clashes with the Yukāribāš tribe (Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 274-76, 278, 280-81; Sepehr, I, pp. 29-33).

THE QAJAR ERA

Upon Karim Khan's death in 1193/1779, Āḡā Moḥammad Khan left Shiraz for Māzandarān and Astarābād. In this period the events in Māzandarān and



Astarābād are so interrelated that they cannot be meaningfully distinguished. In the beginning Āgā Moḥammad Khan was faced with the opposition of his brothers as well as the Zand army. Eventually in 1196/1782, after much struggle, he managed to take Astarābād and appointed Raḥim Khan Davallu governor (*beglerbeg*). He also ordered all the fortresses built around the city to be destroyed (Nāmi, pp. 230, 246-47, 249, 262; Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 286-87, 289; Sāravi, pp. 77, 91-92, 105-8; Sepehr, I, p. 40).

Astarābād was always an important base for Āgā Moḥammad Khan, who made use of its military potentials to expand his dominion. He took advantage of the rivalry among Karim Khan's potential successors to strengthen his position, but, once 'Ali-Mardān Khan seized power in Shiraz (1196-99/1782-85), he was faced with the allied Zand forces marching towards Māzandarān and Astarābād. They took Māzandarān and laid siege on Astarābād; Āgā Moḥammad Khan had blocked their supplies routes in Jer Kolbād. Eventually, the Zand army was defeated so severely that they even evacuated Sāri and fled (Nāmi, pp. 249, 262, 330; Gaffāri Kāšāni, pp. 678-81; Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 295-97; Sepehr, I, pp. 44-45).

Āgā Moḥammad Khan's accession to the throne in 1203/1788-89 also coincided with more rebellions by Turkman tribes in Astarābād (Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 295-97). In 1206/1792, he sent Faṭḥ-'Ali Bābā Khan (the future Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah) to establish peace and protect Astarābād, Dāmḡān and Baṣṭām (qq.v.) against Turkman attacks (Sāravi, p. 208). He also occasionally undertook military expeditions himself to subdue the unruly tribes (Sāravi, pp. 230-35). Āgā Moḥammad Khan bought large tracts of land in Astarābād and converted them into crown lands (Mostawfi, *Šarḥ-e zendagāni* I, p. 487).

When Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah (1211-50/1796-1834) became king, he sent a trusted emissary to Emāmqoli Khan, the *beglerbegi* of Astarābād, and ordered him to ensure the security of the area and keep the Turkman tribes under control. 'Aliqoli Mirzā E'tezād-al-Salṭana reports that rebellions continued until 1218/1803, despite their constant suppression by the central government (E'tezād-al-Salṭana, pp. 102-3). These were in part, no doubt, brought about by mismanagement, ignorance, or cruelty of the governors. A good example is Moḥammad-Zamān Khan, governor from 1229/1814 to 1230/1815, who committed a great number of atrocities, opposed the central government, and was finally arrested and blinded (E'tezād-al-Salṭana, p. 128; Hedāyat, 1994, pp. 368-69; Sepehr, I, pp. 229-30, 256-58).



Meanwhile, an Uzbek attack on Astarābād in 1230-31/1815-16 was repelled (E'tezād-al-Salṭana, p. 133; Se-pehr, I, pp. 73-74; Kormuji, p. 15). Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah's reign was in most respects not much different from the previous periods; but the political turmoil, the keen attention of European powers, and the conclusion of the treaties of Golestān (q.v.) and Torkamānčāy in 1228/1813 and 1243/1828, respectively, and their geopolitical implications made Astarābād a more sensitive region.

During Āgā Moḥammad Khan's reign, Russia had unsuccessfully tried to take over the southeastern shores of the Caspian Sea (Sepehr, I, p. 43). In 1242/1827, under the pretext of shipping rights and also with reference to article 5 of the Treaty of Golestān (Ṭabāṭabā'i Majd, ed., p. 80; see GOLESTĀN TREATY), she sent two warships to the shores of Turkman Şahrā and provoked a rebellion amongst the Turkmans, which was promptly suppressed and Russia had to recall her warships (Hedāyat, 1994, p. 304; Sepehr, I, p. 370-71).

After the treaty of Torkamānčāy, in 1261-62/1845-46, Russia demanded to have a consulate in Astarābād under the provisions of its article 10. The setting up of this consulate marked a new era in Russo-Persian political and commercial relations as Russian subjects were allowed to buy or rent houses, shops, and warehouses, free from government control (Ṭabāṭabā'i Majd, ed., pp. 132-33).

During Moḥammad Shah's reign (1250-64/1834-48) Astarābād continued to be in turmoil. Russia enhanced its influence by the occupation of the island of Āşurāda (q.v.) and setting up military and commercial installations there. The central government's effectiveness was further hampered by frequent changes of governor (E'tezād-al-Salṭana, pp. 530-31; Sepehr, II, pp. 235, 249-50, 252; Hedāyat, 1994, p. 448; Mirzā Ebrāhim, pp. 93, 99).

In spite of considerable economic progress and expansion of imports from, as well as exports to, Russia, Turkman clashes continued during Nāşer-al-Din Shah's reign (1264-1313/1848-96). The customs concession of Astarābād region, granted to Russian merchants in 1263/1847, was abolished (Mirzā Ebrāhim, pp. 94-95, Amir Kabir, p. 252), and, in 1265/1849, Nāşer-al-Din Shah opposed the Russian decision to build a hospital and a great warehouse in Astarābād (Amir Kabir, p. 251). The Russians had conferred the sale of salt and oil to one of their Turkman protégés, and this became a source of dispute between the merchants of Astarābād and Māzandarān (Amir Kabir, pp. 253-55).

Astarābād's fortress had fallen in disrepair and the Turkmans took the



opportunity to loot the city. In 1267/1851, Nāṣer-al-Din Shah ordered Moḥammad-Wali Khan, the governor of Astarābād, to build a fortress and a barrage to stop the invader. The situation was no better when Ja'farqoli Khan was governor (Sepehr, III, p. 363, IV, pp. 139-40; Hedāyat, 1977, pp. 28, 127, 129; Kormuji, p. 161); however, he often retaliated by attacking the insurgents, taking prisoners of war and at the same time destroying many villages and even Astarābād itself (Hedāyat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā'* X, pp. 612, 622-23; Mirzā Ebrāhim, pp. 68-69; Kormuji, p. 231). It seems, however, that the central government was not so unsuccessful in terms of security, as may be witnessed by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's trip to Māzandarān in 1292/1875, where a good number of Astarābād chieftains and dignitaries accompanied Ḥo-saynqoli Khan Sartip, the governor, to meet the Shah in the city of Ašraf (present-day Behšahr) and presented many gifts (Nāṣer-al-Din Shah, pp. 211-41).

According to the available statistics, between the years 1276/1859 and 1280/1864, Astarābād enjoyed some prosperity. There were a considerable number of shops, caravansary, and farms; the cultivation of rice and the silk industry were the principal sources of income (Mirzā Ebrāhim, pp. 48-49). Its exports included soap, spices, henna, silk, leather, horse saddlery, honey, and sheep. In 1265/1849, the government's revenue from the region of Astarābād amounted to 17,200 tomans collected from some 200 villages. This revenue consisted of taxes on private and public properties and on cattle, custom duties, which the government put out to contract, census tax, and rates collected from shopkeepers and craftsmen (E'temād-al-Salṭana, *Ma'āter wa'l-ātār* I, p. 327). Government revenue in 1284/1867, mainly taxes, amounted to some 25,000 tomans. In Šafar 1298/January 1881, in order to facilitate its commercial activities, Russia concluded an agreement with the Persian government to establish telegraph communications between Chakšalar and Astarābād, and Russia undertook all the costs of construction as well as future maintenance of the line (Waḥid Māzandarāni, ed., pp. 140-41). The main sources of revenue during the period 1307-11/1890-94, were soap and gunpowder manufacture, rice, wheat, barley, and citrus fruits.

Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah (1313-24/1896-1907) frequently changed the governors of Astarābād. Sayf-al-Dawla was once again appointed governor in 1902 and claimed taxes that were in arrears (Afzal-al-Molk, pp. 77, 85, 189, 285; Šaybāni, pp. 342, 359, 373-74, 388; Moḡit-al-Salṭana, pp. 57, 135; Qurkānči, pp. 3-4).

Moḥammad-'Ali Shah's reign (1324-27/1907-25) was marked by turmoil all over Persia, including in Astarābād. According to a confidential British report,



Astarābād was without a governor for about seven months and the Turkmans looted the city (Mo'āṣer, I, p. 527). However, another confidential British report states that these clashes between the Turkmans and the soldiers were brought about by the officials' mistreatment and fleecing of the Turkmans (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 27, 31). Moreover, the central government was weak and the soldiers were badly paid. As a result, in 1325/1908 the soldiers refused to obey Naṣr-al-Salṭana and attack the Turkmans; instead they occupied the governor's office. According to a Russian government report, once the mutiny ended and the soldiers were discharged (7 June 1908), there was not a single soldier left in Astarābād (*Sbornik. . .*, 1988, I, pp. 115-16, 261-62). The following year, there was more tension between Moḥammad-'Ali Shah and the Constitutionalists, and the government once again was unable to pay the soldiers, who promptly rose in rebellion. As a result, the Turkmans increased their attacks on the surrounding villages (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 43-44).

When Moḥammad-'Ali Shah attacked the Majles (Parliament), the Society of Astarābād Constitutionalists (Anjoman-e mašruṭakvāhān-e Astarābād) followed the Society of Rašt Constitutionalists in calling for general mobilization (Maqṣudlu, I, p. 48; Mo'āṣer, II, p. 969). After the bombardment of the Majles, during the period known as "the Minor Despotism" (*Estebdād-e ṣaḡir*), the Society of Astarābād Constitutionalists, like other such societies across the country, was closed. However, according to the British secret agent and Russian consulate reports, the opposition to the central government became radicalized and the mood of the public meetings held in the Masjed-e Jāme' became belligerent (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 55, 81-84; Baširi, ed., 1990, II, p. 413). In 1326/1908, the Constitutionalists of Astarābād wrote a letter to Mirzā 'Ali Khan Ṣāhir-al-Dawla, the governor of Astarābād, declaring that, in accordance with the instruction of the '*olamā*' of Najaf, they would no longer pay taxes to the government (Ṣāhir-al-Dawla, pp. 402-3); they also sent a telegram to Moḥammad-'Ali Shah, declaring their support of the constitutional government (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 88; Baširi, ed., 1990, II, p. 342).

In the meantime, the exports of Astarābād cotton to Russia continued without interruption in 1908 and afterwards, and Astarābād, Bandar-e Gaz, and Āšurāda customs functioned as before, generating considerable revenues (Maqṣudlu, I, p. 33)

In 1327/1909, disorder and tension increased and the governor added fuel to the fire by barricading himself in the citadel (Maqṣudlu, I, p. 93; Baširi, ed., 1990, II, pp. 469-70). To make matters worse, the Turkman tribe of Ja'farbāy,



which had already announced its support of Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah, assassinated the Constitutionalists’ representative (Baširi, ed., 1990, II, p. 530). According to the documents of the Russian Ministry of Foreign affairs, in 1327, people of Astarābād ransacked the ammunition depot. Meanwhile, war erupted between the Turkmans and the Russian army, which caused heavy damages to the city and nearby countryside. The situation was so critical that on 2 April 1909, the senior Russian adviser in Astarābād, cabled for help from the Cossack army (*Sbornik. . .*, ed., 1988, II, pp. 117, 134-35). Many villages were burnt, all the shops were closed in Astarābād and there was a shortage of bread and meat (Maqṣudlu, I, p. 122). Finally, the arrival of the Russian military commissioner on 10 April, 1909, put an end to the disturbances and, after the Turkmans looted the city once again, the situation became calm (*Sbornik. . .*, 1988, II, p. 150).

Clashes between the Constitutionalists and the anti-Constitutionalists continued; for a while the latter had the upper hand and the Constitutionalists had to seek refuge at the Russian consulate in Astarābād. On 26 April 1901, the partisans of Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah, who had taken over the control of the city, demanded the return of the Constitutionalist members of the city council and the delivery of the ammunitions looted. On 1 May 1909, the refugees left the consulate and the city regained its calm (*Sbornik. . .*, 1988, II, pp. 169, 176). Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah was eventually dethroned and exiled to Russia, where he continued his intrigues by provoking the Turkmans, to which the Constitutionalists responded by arming the population and taking other security measures (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 229-30).

In 1911, when Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah returned to Persia in an attempt to regain his throne, a great number of the Constitutionalists had to seek refuge at the Russian consulate once more. Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah entered Astarābād on 23 July 1911. He granted a general amnesty, appointed a new governor for Astarābād, and proceeded to mobilize an army and recover the weapons that had been looted (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 271-73, 276). He was, however, defeated by the Constitutionalists at Firuzkuh and fled to Gomeš Tappa, taking refuge among the Turkmans. Once more anarchy prevailed in Astarābād. There were rumors of a government military expedition to the region to arrest Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah and the Turkmans seized the opportunity to pillage the city. Finally, the Russian consul intervened and took charge of the city (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 280-87).

There was much confusion; Moḥammad-‘Ali Shah made a number of new



appointments, including a new governor and ordered the confiscation of the Contitutionalists' properties. He exacted new taxes from the peasants to pay for his army. Russians clearly wielded the real power and Ivanov, the Russian consul, in effect ruled Astarābād (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 287-90, 296). Mo-ḥammad-'Ali Shah eventually fled once more to Russia, leaving his brother, Šojā'-al-Salṭana, in Astarābād. According to the available documents, Russian soldiers occupied the banks of the Qarasu River and the area to the west of the city in order to defend the city against the forces of the Contitutionalists (*mojāhedīn; Sbornik . . .*, 1988, VIII, pp. 1695-96, 1970). To make the matters worse, a severe epidemic broke out and a destructive fire gutted the city *bāzār*. The population was terrorized; the haphazard interference of the Russians in defiance of the central government, their arbitrary removal of rural administrators, and their purchase of villages to turn them over to Russian subjects, added to the general insecurity and confusion (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 302, 316, 329, 332, 363).

The *bāzār* was closed most of the time, since the political instability during Moḥammad-'Ali Shah's brief reign did not provide much incentive for investment. Under the circumstances, Russian investments in a cotton gin, a rice mill, a flour factory, and an ice-making plant was of considerable importance (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 34, 47). The British secret agent in Astarābād reported that Astarābād trade greatly suffered after the return of Moḥammad-'Ali Shah to Gorgān, and the *bāzār* fire caused a great deal of damage (Maqṣudlu, I, p. 329). When the authority of the central government was re-established, Sardār Afḵam was appointed governor, but given Russian intrigues and interference, even during the parliamentary elections of 1333/1915, he was greatly restricted in his capacity to govern.

With the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Bandar Gaz Customs as well as the Russian Loan Bank (see [BANKING](#)) were closed down, and the region of Astarā-bād faced an economic crisis. Prices soared and the export of Astarābād rice was prohibited. In order to put an end to the anarchy, the central government ordered the governor of Astarābād to clarify the situation of crown lands in the region and to take appropriate measures to return to the rightful owners the land that had been forcefully expropriated by former governors, and to re-establish security and order (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 411, 425).

According to the Russian embassy report of 9 Šawwāl 1333/20 August 1915, as well as that of the British secret agent in 1334/1916, the Ottoman and German governments tried to undermine the Russians influence in the region (Bayāt, ed., p. 232; Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 434-35, 458-59, 463), which may explain why the



latter transferred soldiers and military equipment to Astarābād (Maq-ṣudlu, I, p. 505). Meanwhile, there were more skirmishes in the occupied territories with the Turkmans who, the Russians believed, were provoked by the Ottomans, and, as a result, the Russians decided to disarm all the villagers in the region (Maqṣudlu, I, pp. 514, 518, II, 528-30; Bayāt, ed., pp. 245-46).

On the economic front, the closure of Bandar Gaz, K̄vaja Nafas, and Gomeš Tappa custom houses at the end of 1334/1916 aggravated the economic recession in the region, which prompted the governor of Astarābād to write a letter to the Ministry of Interior protesting against the closure. During the same year, the governor levied a tax per head of cattle, which further aggravated the population. Turkmans, instigated by the Ottomans, kept fighting Russian forces, so the latter decided to disarm the rural population. In 1335/1917, there appeared signs of famine: there was scarcity of wheat, barley, and cooking oil and the price of wheat and rice rose sharply. Local authorities were unable to cope with the situation (Maqṣudlu, I, p. 474, II, pp. 544, 561-62, 564, 735). On 8 Ša'bān 1335/29 May 1917, the Turkman elders together with the 'olamā' wrote a letter to the Ministry of Interior and complained about the scarcity of foodstuffs, the closure of custom houses, and the atrocities of the Russian officials (Bayāt, ed., pp. 246-47), following which, according to the Ministry of Interior's report, dated 7 Ramažān 1335/27 June 1917, the former consul of Russia in Astarābād was accused of inciting sedition, declared persona non grata, and was ordered to leave the country (Bayāt, ed., pp. 248-49).

By 1335/1917, the Jangali Movement (*Nahzat-e jangal*) in Gilān had gained strength, consequently Russian forces in Astarābād took stringent security measures (Maqṣudlu, II, p. 533). However, the October Revolution of 1917 brought a radical upheaval in Russian foreign policy and following the Revolution the Russian soldiers refused to obey orders and this in turn intensified the crisis in Astarābād. In 1336/1918, representatives of the Jangali Movement were sent to Astarābād to explore the possibility of extending the movement from Gilān to this region and probably appoint a governor, but with the arrival of gendarme (see gendarmerie) forces, they had to abandon their project (Maqṣudlu, II, pp. 586, 590; Gilak, pp. 80-81; Malekzāda, V, pp. 1075-76). The situation in Astarābād, however, according to the available documents, remained tense and uneasy (Maqṣudlu, II, pp. 620-22, 636, 696-97; Bayāt, ed., pp. 210-11). After the defeat of the Mensheviks by the Bolsheviks in Russia, a great number of Mensheviks took refuge in Astarābād and the



central government later transferred them to Khorasan (Maqşudlu, II, pp. 697-98, 702-3).

THE PAHLAVI ERA

In the Pahlavi era (1921-79) Persia underwent major political, social, and economic changes that had repercussions in the region of Gorgān. The particular development that fundamentally changed the life of the people, and transformed the landscape of the region was the expansion of cash crops and large scale mechanized farming in the period of 1930s-70s. The main factor aiding the agricultural development of the region was the availability of a vast track of highly fertile, uncultivated land suitable for mechanized farming in the Gorgān plain, with a single owner, the Pahlavi Property Administration (PPA; Edāra-ye amlāk-e Pahlavi). Also helped the development of commercial farms in the region was the absence of traditional system of landowner-peasant relationship in the Gorgān plain.

The Reżā Shah period (1921-41) was marked by a number of significant changes in the region. These included: (1) Law and order was established in the province by dispatching army contingents in 1925 and disarming the Turkman tribes. A group of them were subsequently forced to settle in the newly reconstructed city of Gonbad-e Qābus (q.v.). (2) The entire region was appropriated by the PPA in 1934 (Lambton, pp. 256-57). (3) Cash crops and mechanized farming were developed by the PPA and local merchants. (4) The expansion of roads and, above all, the construction of the Trans-Iranian Railway system connecting the region via Bandar-e Torkaman (then Bandar-e Šāh) to Tehran and the Persian Gulf port of Kōrramšahr in 1937.

As the central government established its authority and the tribes were disarmed in this period, the chronic tribal rebellions and skirmishes ceased and there was an opportunity to improve commercial activities and increase agricultural production in the fertile region of Gorgān. As a result, new farms were developed by a number of prosperous Turkman merchants to cultivate rice for export to Russia from the late 1920s to the 1930s. More importantly, from 1934-41, the PPA played a significant part in developing cash crops and introducing mechanized farming by using some 20 tractors and combines, reclaiming marsh lands, bringing American cotton seeds, building modern tobacco and cotton ginning factories, and by forcing peasants to cultivate cotton and tobacco. The cultivated areas under cash crops rapidly increased, with, for example, the area under cultivation of cotton rising from 5,000



hectares to 17,000 between 1934 and 1937 (Okazaki, pp. 7-8; Gorgāni, p. 326; Šawqi, pp. 44-46; Bahrāmi, p. 308).

Gorgān of 1941-53, similar to other provinces of Persia, saw a period of occupation and instability. On 4 Šahrivar 1320 Š./26 August 1941, Soviet Union forces invaded northern provinces of Persia and remained there until 1945. After 1945, Gorgān followed the pattern in the rest of the country with phases of political turbulence in relation to the dispute over the nationalization of the oil industry and its aftermath with the partisans of the National Front, members of the pro-Soviet Tudeh Party, as well as independent local political figures, participating in street demonstrations and clashes among each other (Maʿṭufi, pp. 370-71).

Following the forced abdication of Reżā Shah in 1941, small plots of crown lands were returned to their previous owners. As a result, local merchants and landowners expanded their farmlands in the 1940s (see, e.g., numbers 1 and 2 in Table 1). The main impetus for change, however, came in the late 1940s to early 1950s, when a number of entrepreneurs from outside the region formed large-scale mechanized farms. Two enterprises, established in 1949 and 1950, pioneered the formation of large-scale mechanized farming in the region: Gorgān Dry Farming Company (Šerkat-e sehāmi-e zerāʿati-e deymikār-e Gorgān) directed by Engineer Ebrāhim Mahdavi, then minister of agriculture, and Wheat Planting Company (Šerkat-e sehāmi-e gandomkār), directed by Engineer Kamāl Taḡdisi (later Ṭabāṭabāʿi Farm). The shareholders of both companies included a number of influential politicians, high-ranking officials, landowners, and merchants from Tehran. They were followed in the 1950s by a number of other large farmers (see Table 1). The land obtained by these entrepreneurs came primarily from the lease and subsequent purchase of cultivated and barren land from the PPA. Some land was also obtained by leasing and reclaiming private land claimed by the Turkaman tribes, and religious *waqf* land.

The new drive for the rapid expansion of middle-sized farms came in the latter half of the 1950s, when the PPA (now incorporated into the Pahlavi Foundation) initiated the sale of uncultivated crown lands. A large number of government officials and retired army officers, middle-sized merchants and landowners, purchased plots of crown lands and established mechanized farms (Okazaki, p. 13).

Until the mid-1950s, wheat cultivation, which was not labor intensive,



constituted the main cultivated crop in the Gorgān plain. The rapid expansion of more valuable, labor intensive cotton culture from late 1950s-1970s changed the balance at the cost of wheat culture. Furthermore, the need for a large number of workers for cotton fields led to the formation of plantation-like farms, and the migration of thousands of peasants from the Sistān Province to the Gorgān plain where they settled in the farmlands (Ashraf, pp. 7-9).

In the 1950s-70s Gorgān was a hub of economic activity and, in addition to rapid development of large scale mechanized farming, some important infrastructure projects were implemented there. The construction of Gorgān-Bandar-e Torkaman railway took just over a year, and in 1961 it became operational. It took over seven years, however, before the Vošmgir dam project was realized; its construction began in 1966, two years after the signing of the contract, and the dam became operational in 1971 (Ma'ṭufi, pp. 373, 376). Also developed was the network of roads throughout the region.

A number of industries for processing agricultural products were also introduced into the region, including cotton ginning factories, vegetable seed oil factories, and a large pressed wood factory. In the period of 1961-71, the output of some 33 cotton ginning factories increased from 49,000 tons to over 93,000 and the output of the pressed wood factory in 1970 was 700 particle boards per day (Gorgāni, pp. 325-36).

The increasing investment and activities of large and medium-sized mechanized farms, and agro-industries in this period turned the province into the most prosperous area in Persia's Caspian region.

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