



ŠAFT

ŠAFT, district and small town in southwestern [Gilān](#). The town is located at lat 37°9' N and long 49°24' E. The district covers the catchment basin of the river Pasikānrud up to the level of [Rasht](#). There is a sharp contrast between the district's southern part, where the river cuts deep valleys through the Alborz chain, and its northern part, which belongs to the plain of Gilān. This natural opposition is reflected in demography: inhabitants of the northern part are purely sedentary Gilak, who live upon paddy fields, tea plantations, and sericulture, whereas the Ṭāleš inhabitants of the southern part combine cultivation of paddy fields and small tea gardens or mulberry groves in the lower part of the valleys with pastoral life using several levels of pasturelands in the mountains.

Both groups are nowadays Shi'ite Moslems, but in the early 14th century, according to the Mamluk geographer Fażl-Allāh 'Omari, the population belonged to the Hanbalite sect of Sunni Islam (apud Rabino, p. 197). The origin of the khans of Šaft is controversial; some authors say that they came from Sabzavār in Khorasan, while others maintain that they belonged to the [Čegini](#) tribe from Qazvin and acquired their land by the same subterfuge used by Ḥasan Šabbāḥ, that is, the khans asked the people of Kumsār to give them land to the size of a cow skin, but they turned the cow skin into an extremely long and thin strip of leather with which they could encompass the whole territory of this settlement, which became their capital (Sotuda, p. 224). The lineage of these khans was also called *Piāz Mosalmān* "Onion Muslims," because one of their ancestors, called Haloī, seeing an onion growing on the



top of a thatched roof, exclaimed, “There must be a God!” and converted himself at once to Islam (Rabino, pp. 197-98; Sotuda, p. 216).

The khans of Šaft seem to have been often subject to the emirs of Fuman, although they still held the nominal government of the district in Rabino’s time. The population was estimated at 5,500 persons in 1840, according to [Aleksander Borejko Chodźko](#), whereas Rabino gave for the early 20th century the deceptively precise figure of 1,786 families. The people were required to provide *tofangči*, foot soldiers armed with long guns—500 at the time of Chodźko.

The seat of the khans shifted from place to place. Their first center was Gurāb Šaft, in the vicinity of the modern village of Naşir Maḥalla; its ruins remain hidden in dense thickets of box trees, hence the name Gurākiş (from Ṭāleşi and Gilaki *kiş* “box tree”). In Rabino’s time, the residence of the khans was located at Kumsār, a township divided into four *maḥallas*, with two mosques and some 200 houses scattered in orchards. But the impressive residences of the khans were falling into ruins, because many had to relocate to Rasht, the capital of the province. Another chief place, to the northwest of Kumsār, was Qaşaba, then a large village with a weekly market on Mondays. During the 20th century, it was appointed as the administrative center of Šaft, probably when the whole area was incorporated into the sub-province (*şahrestān*) of Fuman. Called Qaşaba-ye Šaft and later simply Šaft, this small township became the center the district (*baķš*) Šaft, which includes four rural districts (*dehestāns*): Qaşaba, Aḥmad Sargurāb, Čowbar, and Jirdeh.

Šaft gained its autonomy as a sub-province from Fuman by the time of the 1986 census, with boundaries only slightly different from those of the Šaft district within the former sub-province of Fuman: the downstream section of the valley of the Paşikānrud was integrated into this new sub-province and constitutes Mollāsarā rural district, in addition to Jirdeh, Aḥmad Sargurāb, and Čowbar, comprising an area of 622 km². The sub-province had 63,544 inhabitants according to the general census of population and housing in 2006. It remains fundamentally rural, with a rural population of 55,163 persons distributed among 106 villages (see Markaz).

Agriculture is mainly devoted to rice cultivation on the plains and lower parts of the valleys. The northern part of the area, with mainly Gilak and a few mixed Gilak-Ṭāleş villages, benefits from a modern irrigation network, which was developed thanks to construction of the Safidrud dam; a 17 km long

tunnel brings water from the reservoir of Tārik to the piedmont of Alborz in Čowbar, whence to the 51-km canal of Fumanāt, which feeds secondary and tertiary channels in a number of large irrigation units. The Țāleš villages upstream of the canal are allowed to draw water from the tributaries of the Pašikānrud. Rice production improved as a result of this irrigation project. Two activities using lands unsuitable for paddy fields (i.e., old alluvium terraces and lower slopes of the hills) bring the villagers significant income: tea plantations and, especially, sericulture, the production of which is processed in factories in Jirdeh or Fuman. But the production of tea suffered a crisis after the year 2000, subsequent to the privatization of the tea market, which resulted in a dramatic fall of prices and put an end to subsidization of tea planters. C. Allaverdian (pp. 67-78) has studied the various adaptations of peasants in Kortum and Čomāčâ with respect to the size of their holdings and the weight of other activities, such as rice cultivation, pisciculture, or extra-agricultural jobs; however, she doubts whether a total reconversion is possible.

Animal husbandry is restricted to a few head of cattle and some poultry in the Gilak villages, but it is important among the Țāleš, who use several levels of pastureland: winter pasture (*qešlāq*) in the forests of the lower part of the chain, intermediate levels (*miān-band*) towards the upper limit of forests, and higher summer pastures (*yeylāq*). They follow various patterns of pastoral migration—purely pastoral, since wheat and barley cultivation, mentioned in the mountain area by Rabino (p. 199), has disappeared. A number of schemes showing such migratory patterns are available in the literature: (1) a simple two-level scheme is practiced by the shepherds of Siāh Mazgi, who take their sheep to the *yeylāq* of Sute (Bazin, 1980, II, p. 30); (2) a three-level scheme is practiced in Visrud, whence families go with the cattle to the *miān-band* pasture of Ārnangāh, while shepherds take sheep and goats to the higher *yeylāq* of Gerdāv and Band (Afrākta, p. 156); (3) maximal complexity is the norm elsewhere in the valleys of Čenār Rudkān and Emāmzāda Ebrāhim, where the inhabitants use one more groups of pasturelands on the opposite, dryer side of the mountains bound to Țārom District (Pour-Fickoui and Bazin, pp. 60-63). Nevertheless, this pastoral life seems to have declined, since the seasonal bazaars serving the population attending summer pastures have diminished in size and activity; for instance, Da’ele-sar, which counted some 20 shops along with a weekly Friday market in the 1950s, had only five shops left in 1974, and the neighboring Țollāb Barra maintained only three shops (Bazin, 1977, pp. 208-9). Among the products of this pastoral activity, the



cheese from Siāh Mazgi is highly appreciated locally and throughout Gilān.

Another distinctive activity is pottery, concentrated in various *maḥallas* of Jirdeh, where some 100 women produce the well-known *gamaj*, or round cooking pots with lids (*noḵon*), and plates and large hoops used for framing wells (Achouri).

The district has kept a number of sanctuaries bound to the tombs of descendants of the Imams (*emānzāda*) or other saints (Sotuda, pp. 217-24; Rabino, pp. 202-4). The tomb of Šāhzāda Aḥmad in Čomāčā contains a huge Qur'an in the Kufic script, which weighs nine maunds; hence, Rabino's account, which attribute the Qur'an to the sanctuary of No'mān, might be inaccurate. The tomb of Shah Darvišān and the adjoining cemetery in Tekrem, on the bank of the Pašikānrud, surrounded by lofty Siberian elms (*Zelkova crenata*, Pers. *āzād*), demonstrates the frequent link between sanctuaries and remarkable trees (Bazin, 1978, p. 98), whereas the tomb of Sāluk Mo'allem (now called Sālek Mo'allem, a companion of Imam Režā), situated on a mountain, illustrates the category of sanctuaries bound to mountains (*idem*, pp. 100-02). Another sanctuary high in the mountains, 18 km south of Našir Maḥalla, is that of Emānzāda Ešhāq and his sister Ḳayr-al-Nesā', children of Imam Musā Kāžem. All these sanctuaries, and others, receive the visits (*ziārat*) of many pilgrims, especially on Friday eves (*šab-e jom'a*) and in summer.

The most frequented sanctuary, although recently developed, since it was not mentioned by Rabino, is that of Emānzāda Ebrāhim (another son of the seventh Imam), located upstream from Ṭāleqān at an elevation of 630 m (Bazin, 1977, p. 209). The custodian (*motawallī*) of the sanctuary, Mr. Jannati, whose father had the present structure built over the tomb and covered it with a zinc roof and cupola in the 1950s, took the opportunity of the construction of a road suitable for cars and minibuses to Pirezan, a place at a walking distance of 15 minutes, in 1970 to create a touristic-religious resort of about one hundred shops and numerous inns (*mosāfer-kāna*, high wooden constructions in lattice-work) available for rent to tradesmen from Čowbar, Šaft, and Rasht. Combining with its religious value the charm and pleasant atmosphere of its forest and hill environment, this place already received between 50,000 and 100,000 visitors every summer in the 1970s (*ibid.*); this number may have increased if the project of extending the road to the sanctuary itself, and perhaps across the mountains to Ṭārom district, could be achieved.

The network of central places remains modest, with a few large villages,

including the centers of rural districts (Čowbar, Jirdeh, and Mollāsarā), Aḥmad Sargurāb as the center of a new district (2,223 inhabitants in 2006), and Šaft itself as the newly appointed center of the sub-province (6,158 inhabitants in 2006; see Markaz); this is because the whole area remains under the strong influence of the former district center, Fuman, and of the province capital, Rasht—both easily accessible via fine roads.

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