

## **A Review of Commercial Transition in the Persian Gulf during Safavid: Case Study of Bandar Abbas during the Reign of Shah Abbas I (996-1038A.H./1587-1629A.D.)**

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### **Abstract**

The Economic Schedules of Shah Abbas I (1587-1629) are considered an important step forward in bringing a major transition in regional and international commerce during the medieval age. That could possibly performed through an extensive autonomy of the central government on the southern coast specially Hormuz and Kish islands that incurred national benefits in foreign commercial and logistic relationship especially with European countries.

The strategic commodity of silk has had significant role in reconstruction of commercial ties between Iran and European countries. Using historical and geographical accounts (travelogue), this article tries to recognize the importance and status of the southern Iranian ports in silk trade with a case study of Bandar Abbas.

The findings show that the process of silk commerce in Iran was organized with a precise supervision of Shah Abbas himself and his efforts to come up with production centers such as Kashan, Yazd and Isfahan in central Iran as well as export centers in southern regions such as Laar and Bandar Abbas.

**Keywords:** Safavid; Shah Abbas I; Silk Trade; Bandar Abbas.

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## 1. Introduction

Undoubtedly, one of the main components of a successful and large scale economic structure is trading dynamics at national and international levels. The history of Iranian commerce goes back to its geographical and political conditions in the process of development, transformation and declining of economic activities. As many scholars call Safavid as the most powerful Islamic state, the reasons behind this autonomy can be justified by its ability of administrative orders and economic organizations. Also, it has been related to an extensive communication with the then European governments. As such, the economic structure as well as serious interaction in agriculture and trade sectors is essential to be analyzed. Generally, agricultural surveys, land administration and the type of products play an important role in intensifying trade activities. Furthermore, economic plans of Safavid kings, particularly Shah Abbas I, played key role in attracting foreign investments, developing exports and cities. These actions could help advance:

- a) Communication networks by constructing

roads and caravansaries like Zeyn al-din, Zizeh, Chah Ahmad (Kleiss, 2006:55-56)

- b) Establishment of new cities with economic credentials like Farah Abad and Laar.  
 c) Developing southern and northern ports for maritime trade.  
 d) Political stability and economic security with the silk trade monopoly.

This article tries to explain the political-economic evolutions of the Persian Gulf during Safavid with the development of major commercial centers. Also, it describes the role and status of the East India Companies from England, Netherland and others countries.

The research hypothesis is that newly established cities of Safavid in northern, central and southern Iran must have functioned as production, distribution and consumption centers.

The article has used both primary and secondary sources (historical and geographical texts) especially about the Safavid era.

## 2. Economic Structure of Safavid Government:

Economic structures of Safavid were divided into urban (industrial), rural and pastoral economy.

Major urban economic structure of Safavid was based on industry, merchants and salesmen at national and international levels. Safavid kings developed Buyutat-e-Saltanati (Royal Factory) for strengthening the commercial cities such as Isfahan, Kashan, Kerman and Yazd. For that matter, 34 workshops (Tadkhirat al-Muluk, 1981: 123-126) were established. As such, the carpet industry was flourished as a considerable volume of benefits achieved through their export to Europe. So, Safavid especially Shah Abbas I, decided to strengthen industrial infrastructure in some cities. For example, there were 33 main working classes in Isfahan; with eighth caste was busy dealing with fabric weavers (Baker, 1972: 119). Tavernier reported about the royal workshops between Naghsh-e-Jahan Square and Chehel Suton palace:

“There established a large yard where the carpet weaving machines at one side and silk and gold brocade fabric on the other” (Tavernier, 1363: 386).

Textile was considered to encourage central industrial units of Iran and led to turn Qezel base troops into business and

commerce (Ravandi, 1990: 157). On the other hand, in urban economies, traders and merchants had special role because they helped provide the large scale needs of the society (Navaei & Ghaffarifard, 1994:297). Further, Iranians merchants as well as Jewish and Armenian people were versatile in both domestic and international trading (Tavernier, 1976:596).

Shah Abbas I could carry out the monopoly of silk trading across Iran. Based on the economic strategy, the government paid losses and bought farmers' products. Also, he suppressed a public domain called Khasseh or Khaleseh because many people referred illegal admissions there (Lambton, 1990: 213). In that era, there are instances of cooperation and coordination among manufacturing sections (agriculture) and processing (industry).

Pastoral economy recognized as a third branch of the Safavid economy. It included production from animal (Fouran, 1998: 51-66). Firstly, Safavid could rise to power with the support of some tribes, thus they had support from the pastoral economy (Lambton, 1990: 213). Major exchange in

this part included camels, sheep, wool and meat and other products. Among these included the camel exports to Armenia and Anatolia (Olearious, 1976:280).

### **3. The Role of Cities in Safavid Foreign Commerce**

Throughout Iranian history, cities always played key role in the emergence of ideas and human activities. Safavid cities are considered as commercial hub that has a clear indicator of economic reconstruction and social condition. It has had important role in the interaction between government and society. Here, an attempt is made to know a logical understanding of distribution and status of cities in socio-political developments on the basis of southern commercial centers. Undoubtedly, the period of Shah Abbas I (996-1038AH.) is recognized as glorious era for economic cities. Most important factor of urbanization has been the national economic prosperity and a surplus agricultural production (Ashraf, 1964: 17). Productions based on agriculture and animal husbandry as well as using industrial techniques led to the development of cities. In this era, cities

were overflowed by the wealth and money (Falamaki, 1979: 14-15).

Amid Renaissance and Industrial Revolution in Europe, industrialization of cities during Safavid boost textile, weaving centers and weaponry. As a matter of fact, there were 34 royal factories (Tadkhirat al-Muluk, 1981: 123-126) in middle of Safavid era. Moreover, construction of new urban complexes including markets, mosques, palace and other urban elements helped develop and improve this process (Habibi, 1997: 96). Big market (Baazar) considered as heart of city. Spatial distribution patterns of these cities depended on environmental and socio-political variables. Construction and design of cities were undertaken by Safavid architects and planners. For example, as can be indicate to Qazvin, its construction began in 951 AH and finished in 962 A.H. Also, they can divide to two levels:

a) Productive cities, b) Intermediate cities (exchanging cities)

Productive cities undertook silk cultivation. Farah Abad, Ashraf, Rasht, Lahijan and some of Khorasan regions are considered in this group (Karimian &

Taghavi, 2011: 76). Intermediate cities carried out the processing of raw material to consumer goods such as textile, carpet and so on. The royal factories in Isfahan, Yazd and Kashan to be indicate in this group. Importing and exporting cities have important role in the trading circle. Laar, Shiraz and Kerman were major cities for silk trade. One of the Shah Abbas ideas for economic development was commercial routes from East-West to North-South. This is determined by spread of southern ports in the Persian Gulf as Bandar-e-Abbas. Therefore, northern ports such as Farah Abad and other centers could outstrip from Astrakhan Port in Russia (Mathee, 1999:140-153, Taghavi, 2010: 58-60).

Tabriz - First Safavid Capital- were engaged in trade as one of the great cities of Iran (Romlou, 1970: 85). In this city, the Armenians have profited Guilan silk Business due to more experience and skills (Tavernier, 1976: 67). One of another centers can be noted Qazvin. It constructed by Shah Tahmasb as second Safavid capital (Ghazi Al-Qomi, 1972: 378-379). Farah Abad and Ashraf-ol Belad are two

safavid cities that constructed by Shah Abbas I between 1020-1026 A.H.(Iskandar Beyk Torkaman,1990:586/849). In Farah Abad occupied Armenian, Georgian and Christian groups. Population structure of this city involved 40,000 Armenian, 12000 Georgian, 7000 Jewish, 20000 Muslim and local people (Dellavaleh, 1983:171-443). Main market town were similar to Neghsh-e-Jahan Square in Isfahan in central square around which were economic exchange center(Fraser, 1826: 73-76). Chardin described Kashan as:

"Wealth and income people of Kashan composed from Textile and silk weaving " (Chardin, 1975, C-3: 85).

It should be mentioned that the city of Kashan in Safavid era was one of the most populous and important cities in terms of trade and master handicraftsmen (Olieurios, 1976:166). In southwestern of Isfahan, a new urban complex was founded with Gheysariyeh, Caravanserai, bazaars and mint (Gaube, 1987: 599). In southern Iran, there were many cities to transport and export silk products and other goods to Europe via sea. These cities were Laar, Shiraz, Kerman and Bandar Abbas. In

other words, Kerman was an intermediate city to export spicy materials to Indian subcontinent during the rule of Ganj-e-Ali Khan (1005-1033 A.H.). Figuera, a Spanish ambassador at the court of Shah Abbas I writes about Laar as:

"... basically, Laar was permanent center for commercial exchange. In this city, there are many Caravanserais and Bazaars. Kerman merchants and those from other areas came here for trading. Laar recognized as lowland center for Hormuz regions "(Figueroa, 1976: 88-87).

Freyer also explains about money power of Laar city. He writes that Laary silver coins in Hormuz valued in India (Freyer, 1997: 229). Big markets and Caravansaries with four Ivan and semi-circular towers are some of the architecture elements there.

Historical texts indicate about Ghamroun area and Bandar Abbas (Bandar-i-Abbasi) (Sadid al-Saltaneh, 1981:576-559). Before the conquest of Imam Gholi Khan in 1031 A.H., Bandar Abbas consisted of Bandel and Ghamroun that was a small village with 100 or 200 houses and a Great Mosque iraf ports for commercial exchange between government and local leaders such

(Smith,1970:39). After that, Tomas Herbert (1627) writes:

"Bandar-i-Abbasi is a multinational city with an international trading port where commercial transaction took place between merchants from England, Portugal, and Russia and so on". In this city, there are more one hundred houses (Herbert, 1928:41-49/121).

#### **4. Historical Evolutions of Foreign Commerce in Persian Gulf**

Persian Gulf has always played important role in regional and international trade. Archaeological evidences like inscriptions in this area are concerned to Uruk IV (Abdi, 1983: 27). It is where ancient Deylamon land or Makken and Maloukh regions were identified. Historical evidences indicate cultural - economic communications between ancient Mesopotamia and Iran through the Persian Gulf and the Sea of Oman during Ubaid period (Ibid: 36-37). In Ilam era, Liyan port was recognized as the most important commercial center in southen Iran some 4000 years ago (Pezard, 1914: 347/477). During Acheamenids and Sasanian, there existed famous Oboleh, Rishahr and S as Kharrasin and Elimaeids (Ibid:253).

In the early Islamic era, Siraf was

transformed into the most important center for commercial exchanges leading to emergence of new cities, money and turnovers. It is worth mentioning that Kish, Teez and Hormuz ports replaced Mahrouban, Siraf and Jannabeh during Seljuq (Istakhri, 1981:31-36). The followings are cited as reasons for transition of major centers:

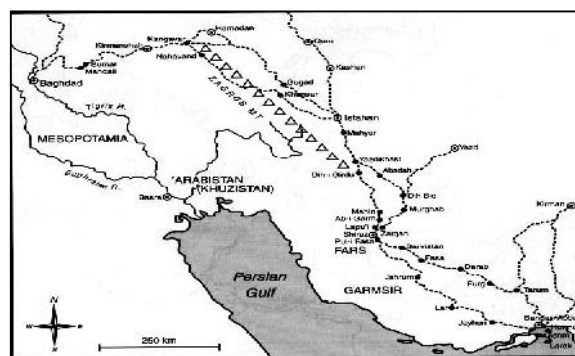
- a) The lack of autonomy dominant in Fars and Khuzestan provinces.
- b) Fatimid Dynasty supported the sea trading and transformed it to the Mediterranean Sea.
- c) Shabankareh local government in East of Fars province.
- d) Economic and political decline of Buyids Dynasty in South of Iran.
- e) Tribal contacts of Omanis specially Qalhat (Vosoughi,1997: 104-105)

### 5. The Role of Bandar Abbas in Commercial Exchanges with Eastern Indian Companies

The political ascendancy of Shah Abbas I in southern Iran was the caused of the central autonomy on the Persian Gulf and Fars Province with:

- A) The destruction of Fars local dynasty of Zolghadr in 1003 A.H.

- B) The downfall of Laarestan rulers by Allah Verdi Khan in 1010 A.H.
- C) Bahrain triumph and the Portugal castle of Ghamron
- D) Hormuz conquest and Safavid fortifications in 1031 A.H.(Vosoughi, 2012: 110-112) (Map1).



Map 1: Matthee,1999:19

Hormuz Triumph (1031 A.H/1622s) was the most important evolution accrued in the Persian Gulf during Shah Abbas I. The event could determine the restoration of Iranian power in the Persian Gulf (Floor, 2006: 234). As a matter of fact, Bandar Abbas turned into the first commercial center for 120 years. Bandar Abbas was conquered by Imam Gholi Khan in 1022s AH. Before the conquest, the city was a small village with about 200 populations. Moreover, economic interactions following the conquest of the Persian Gulf resulted in as follows:

- a) Economic evolutions until the death of Shah Abbas I(1031- 1038 AH)
- b) Netherlands commercial adventure (1038-1135 AH)
- c) Insecurity in lowland and commercial collapse of Bandar Abbas (1135-1146AH) (Vosoughi,1997:185-215)

Primitive relations between the British Court and Shah Abbas I go back to 1007s AH. It was under the same contact, Sherlli Brothers came to Iran. Subsequently, Iran undertook to provide connivances of international commercial transaction for them in the Persian Gulf. Sherlli Brothers too tries to attract foreign investments in silk trading especially merchants from Poland, Spain and Russia (Shellri, 1975:112-119). On the other hand, the East Indian Company of Netherland played important role in southeastern Asia and the Persian Gulf with spice-based commerce and could obtain monopoly in silk trade (Navaei & Ghafarifard, 1994:176). Commercial documentary shows that Netherlands had contributed in silk trade during Shah Abbas I. For Example, it was indicated that silk was bought 600 BAR by Netherlands companies with 900,000

Frank in 1652. Also, in 1672, exchange volume of silk by Netherlands merchants estimated to reach from 10,000,000 to 12,000,000 Frank (Lafun and Rabino, 1985: 53-54).

Synchrony of Isfahan collapsed during Shah Sultan Hussein with the decline of Bandar Abbas port. This problem also caused lowland cities like Laar and Shiraz to be invaded by Afghans and Omani tribes. As a matter of fact, it resulted in changing to administrative organization of southern commercial centers. For example, Hormuz replaced apposite of Bandar Abbas for commercial exchanges (Vosoughi, 1997: 206-210).

In the late Safavid period, commercial decline was much visible especially during Shah Sultan Hussein Safavi because small units like farmers effected from financial shortages. Consequently, it led to impoverishment and the feudalism. Tax imposed on Christians and Muslims led to general strikes. Also, monopoly on silk after the death of Shah Abbas I caused immense socio-economic corruptions at the court hence; deep gap between farming community and intermediate, merchants



and courtiers (Lockhart, 1996: 14).

## 6. Conclusion

From ancient times, Persian Gulf historical evolutions represent status and geopolitical importance of countries surrounding this water. Safavid era found to be creating economic colonization in order to attract businesses and investments in the Persian Gulf. Studies show that the attempt made by Safavids not only led to the emergence of commercial centers in the Persian Gulf but accumulation in lowlands. Empowering of local rulers in the south of Fars province risked socio-economic life. Significant changes in the displacement in commercial centers during the Islamic period, especially in later Safavid era damaged the exchange system. Bandar Abbas which remained the most important center of trade exchanges for more than one hundred years gradually transferred to Hormuz Port. An important factor that led to the decline of Bandar Abbas seems to be difficulties in supplying water for local inhabitants. Furthermore, Bandar Abbas was city without fortifications. In other words, Bandar Abbas between 1031-1036 A.H. can be explained as a political symbol

for Safavid against European countries. Thus, due to the sulk monopoly elimination after the death of Shah Abbas I provided socio-economic corruptions in the court as well as made deepening gap between farmers, merchants and courtiers. All of these variables led to the collapse of functional cities and economic structure in late Safavid era.

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بازخوانی تحولات تجاری خلیج فارس در عصر صفوی  
مطالعه موردی: بندرعباس در عصر سلطنت شاه  
عباس اول (۱۰۳۸-۹۹۶ هـ.ق)

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تدابیر اقتصادی شاه عباس اول (۱۰۳۸-۹۹۶ هـ.ق) در مناطق مرکزی و جنوبی ایران منجر به تحولات مهمی در عرصه تجارت منطقه ای و بین المللی شد. این مهم از طریق حاکمیت گسترده و منسجم حکومت مرکزی بر سواحل جنوبی ایران با چیرگی بر جزایر هرمز و کیش و نیز ارتباط منطقی با اروپاییان و حفظ منافع ملی در تجارت خارجی میسر گشت. به طوری که در اندک زمانی ارتقاء سطح کیفی بازرگانی خارجی ایران را به دنبال داشت. در این میان، کالای استراتژیک ابریشم، نقش بسزایی در بازسازی روابط تجاری روبه رشد ایران و کشورهای اروپایی ایفا می کرد. در این مقاله سعی شده با بهره گیری از منابع تاریخی و جغرافیایی، اهمیت و جایگاه بنادر جنوبی ایران در تجارت ابریشم با یک مطالعه موردی درباره بندرعباس، مورد ارزیابی قرار گیرد.

نتایج این تحقیق نشان می دهد که فرایند تجارت ابریشم در دوره سلطنت شاه عباس اول محصول ارتباط تنگاتنگ میان شهرهای تولیدکننده در مرکز ایران چون کاشان، یزد و اصفهان، شهرهای واسطه ای در مناطق جنوبی تر نظیر لار و شهرهای بندری و صادرکننده نظیر بندرعباس بود که به نوعی حلقه های اصلی تجارت ابریشم را تشکیل می دادند.

واژگان کلیدی: صفویان، سلطنت شاه عباس اول، تجارت ابریشم، بندرعباس.

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