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The Attitude of Shah Abbas I towards Armenian and Zoroastrian religious Minorities during his reign

Abdul Aziz MovahedNasaj and M.Tofighian

Department of History, Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran

Address For Correspondence:
 Abdul Aziz MovahedNasaj,
 Department of History, Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Safavie was in 907AH and coronation of Shah Abbas I was in 989 AH in Herat. The relative tolerance views of Shah Abbas I was a reaction to rigid policies of Shah Tahmasb and harsh policies of Shah Ismail II. People with different religions had considerable freedom during his reign. He moved Armenians from Azerbaijan Julfa to Isfahan and built the New Julfa, and he was very kind to them. Zoroastrians of Yazd, like other religious minorities, had a far better situation in terms of social and cultural situation in comparison with other sections of the Safavie era. In this research we try to address the situation of minorities such as Armenians and Zoroastrians in Iran during Shah Abbas reign by using references and resources.

KEY WORDS: Shah Abbas, the Safavie, Armenians, Zoroastrians.

INTRODUCTION

Empowerment of Shah Abbas I (996-1038) and his competence in producing refocus, which led to the development of Iran in various aspects, made him the ultimate authority in all affairs. Shah Abbas's reputation for tolerance and Lack of ceding too much ground to traditional religionists, which was somehow due to his early relationship with Naghotian and their dictates on his young mind, had special effect on his behavior towards religious minorities and facilities for religious practices.

In a quick comparison between Armenians and Zoroastrians in the government, their situation can be considered from two sides: first, in terms of elements that could be effective in superiority in Shah Abbas's view, And second, the similarity of Shah Abbas's behavior towards them. In the first dimension, some effective factors in superiority can be seen in the following items: commercial and economic growth, and Armenians high place in transporting silk to Europe, the need for expansion of political and commercial ties with Europe in regard to the question of the Ottoman Empire, and eventually the support of Christian Europe for their coreligionists in Iran and Shah Abbas's show off in the eyes of ambassadors and foreign nationals for being liberal. And in the second dimension: payment of ransom and forced migration of both of them to Isfahan was the common social status of these minorities.

In this article we try to overview the behavior of Shah Abbas towards Armenians and Zoroastrians during his reign. Since comprehensive research has not been done in this area, perhaps this little effort to provide information could be an introduction to more studies that should be done in all Iranian and foreign sources.

This topic falls in historical and descriptive – analytic studies. In this research, historical inquiry is used and data collection is based on the writings of Safavi historians and European travelogues and also new researches.

Armenians:

Ottoman attacks to Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1031 AH were under the leadership of Choghaloghli, the great leader of Turks. To deal with the attacks of Ottoman Empire from the North West, Shah Abbas I commanded scorched-earth war policy (Philosophical: 1375, p. 3/206). According to this command, all the inhabitants of the cities and villages of Julfa, Nakhjavan and surroundings of Ghars and Yeravan to Arzanehrome, migrated to Iran with all their livestock and properties. States become haunted and his army not only destroyed the cities, but also burned all the trees. They also infected water sources so that the enemy could not use them (Sharden: 1345, p. 2/469). In this way, Shah deprived Ottoman army from food and water and prevented them from progressing in Iran territory. As a result, a significant number of residents migrated into Iran. Those who

survived this arduous journey settled in different parts of Iran, especially Isfahan and Mazandaran. It should be noted that Armenian migration continued intermittently since then and it seems that it happened in eight steps during Safavie reign. It can be said that Shah Abbas I fully understood that he needs capable and mighty people to grow the economy and trading, because without rich people he couldn't reach his economic and trade aspirations. As a result, Armenians who were well harmonized with the demands of Shah Abbas moved from Julfa to Isfahan, the capital of Safavie. With this action, in addition to reaching economic goals, he could prevent Ottoman attacks from the North West Iran and also, by changing commercial center from Julfa to Isfahan, and changing trade routes of Silk Road to Iran's southern ports, strike the body of Ottoman economy and help the country to flourish in economy and trade.

Based on their geographical location and social funds, Christians transferred to different region. Most Christians, especially Armenians and Georgians settled in Isfahan and Mazandaran. Shah Abbas I had ordered that every ethnic should be settled in a province which is close to their original home in terms of climate and requirements of life (Raein: 1977, pp. 32-33). Safavi king built Julfa strict in the suburbs of Isfahan for Armenians of Armenia Julfa and named it Julfa based on their main town. Those Armenians who were familiar with grape trees were sent to Mazandaran and they settled in Farah Abad town which was founded in the year 1020 AH and they called it Christians' heaven (Delavale: 1990, p. 140).

After Armenians settlement in Iran, Shah Abbas I granted them complete freedom of religion in order to eliminate and prevent any interruptions in their work and life. In addition, to prevent injustice and oppression of government agents towards Armenians, he ordered Armenians to have a representative to defend their interests with the post of sheriff. This sheriff could be in court whenever needed and he was the head of nation and Vice-King and he had full authority in Julfa (Sue: 1974, p. 190). Shah Abbas also allowed Julfa Armenians to dress like Iranians and Armenian leaders could have gold and silver harness and pitches in their saddle like rich Iranians. In line with this policy, Shah considered himself the father of Armenians and he was always careful that no harm or insult happens to them by fanatic or malicious Muslims (Raein: 1977, p. 33). In line with his supportive policy, Shah Abbas attended their religious ceremonies without any religious considerations, such as Khajshoyan, which was one of the most important Armenian ceremonies (Delavale: 1990, p. 994).

Shah Abbas I also had a special trust and interest in Georgians and many Armenians and Georgians who accepted Islam became courtiers and nobles of his court. In order to reduce the power and influence of Sufis and Ghezelbash in court, he entered Armenians and Georgians as new force to court. Although this policy was started by Shah Tahmasb, Shah Abbas I pursued this policy more widely and Armenians and Georgians found privileged statuses in the court of Shah Abbas I with his support. Allah Verdikhan, Armenian commander who was from Georgian people, found his way to court in Shah Tahmasb reign by changing his religion and after passing hierarchy of progress in the year 1004 AH, Shah Abbas I appointed him supreme head of Gulf state and Generalissimo of Iran (philosophical: 1974, pp. 2/249, 430).

It is worth noting that Shah Abbas as a Muslim king, just like his predecessors, sought to interest Christians in Islam and Iranian Muslim community also expected him to do so. He sent teachers and clerics to different areas in order to teach Muhammad's religion to Armenians and make their children familiar with Islam (Darhohanian, p. 51). In line with encouraging policy, Shah promised that if minorities accept Islam, they would receive huge sums of money and special privileges. In other measures, he would pardon Christians who were sentenced to death in exchange for accepting Islam. Sometimes, according to the circumstances of time and perhaps some political considerations, he had hostile behavior towards Armenians and forced them to convert to Islam; Such that in 1030 AH, during his visit to Koohrang region of Isfahan, due to insults and criticism of some Armenian women, he forced local people to accept Islam. Following this action, a significant number of Christians in the area became Muslims. These sabotaging behaviors of Shah Abbas I made Iranian Armenians scared and even Armenian businessman who were in Europe became doubtful about returning to Iran. Therefore, after a short time, Shah changed his policy and ordered religious freedom for Armenians and meanwhile assured Khajenazar, head of the Julfa Armenians, that he would never force them to accept Islam (Philosophical: 1375, p. 3/1159). In the era of Shah Abbas I we see less of this kind of behavior towards Iranian Armenians, because due to economic and political interests, Shah had taken a reasonable policy with Armenians, especially Julfa Armenians. Due to few sectional behaviors of Shah towards Christians, we can deny their social freedom in this time. By examining the sources of the era of Shah Abbas I we realize that in light of Shah's assistance, Armenians made remarkable progress in Iran. By taking charge of the silk trade, they made such a progress that some of them, like Khaje Petrous, had forty thousand silver coins, without calculation of summer homes and estate jewelry and gold dishes and their precious cargoes, after death (Tavernie: 1979, p. 81).

Finally, it must be noted that Shah Abbas's reasonable approach towards Armenians allowed him to use their positive potential in political and commercial sphere and help develop and boost business in Iran. These measures ultimately led to accumulation of wealth and economic development and business in the era of Shah Abbas I.

Zoroastrians:

Although Shah Abbas preferred Armenians to Zoroastrians due to political and economic requirements, two obvious similarities can be marked in his behavior towards them: receiving ransom and forced migration to Isfahan according to the law that was based on the provisions of Islamic jurists from the Koran, life and property of followers of the book became protected by Islamic government by paying an amount of money (Danet: 1968, p.12). But despite circumstances and fluctuations in the amount of ransom in the Islamic Middle Ages, it was important that this tradition continued to Safavi era. During this time, although the Shiite jurists insisted on applying more discount for Zammeh and not to specify a certain amount, during the reign of kings like Shah Abbas and according to his tolerance towards religious minorities, the amount of Zoroastrians ransom became balanced and it was determined as an ounce of gold (Tajbakhsh:1983, p.1/315).

The second aspect of this similarity which is specific to Shah Abbas era was forced migration of both minorities to Isfahan. However, it cannot be ignored that Zoroastrians didn't have economic and political importance in comparison with Armenians. In other words, not only they didn't have a place in commercial economics, they also were not supported by the powerful countries and in religious field, they were accepted as Zammeh due to tolerance (Danet: 1385, p.12).

One of the most important events related to the harassment of minorities by Shah Abbas can be classified in two levels: forced migration of Yazd Zoroastrians to Isfahan (1035 AH) and murder of the Zoroastrians. Although according to resources information and political and economic circumstances, action of Shah Abbas in forcing Armenians to migrate to Isfahan can be justified, in reviewing this behavior towards Zoroastrians, we don't see such reasons and resources have described their housings in Isfahan. In terms of time, apparently in 1035 AH, Shah Abbas displaced a large number of these minorities from Yazd and Kerman to Isfahan and accommodated them in a new-built village named Gabarabad or Gabarestan which was connected to Julfa. This village which later became Hosseinabad, consisted of a group of Zoroastrianism scholars and farmers- especially from Yazd, but many of them migrated to Yazd during siege of Isfahan by Afghans (Shahrmardan:1970, p.340).

However, aside the manner of this incident and disaster similarities of Yazd Zoroastrians with Armenians in forced settlement, based on collecting Zoroastrian books a year later and expecting Shah Bahram in Zoroastrians belief, we can better understand some parts of Shah Abbas's reasons for this forced migration. According to belief, Shah Bahram is a mighty person who will rise and will make Iran like heaven in Pishdad and Kian time, and they have seen countless sufferings in 1300 years and they hope to see him (Shahrmardan:1973, p.268). Thus, and since rise of Shah Bahram in few years which is the end of Yazdgerd millennium, is noted in exchanged letters between Yazd Zoroastrians and Parsis Indians, and on the other hand, nipping in the bud every thread by Shah Abbas, by combining these two it can be understood that he tried to disperse them and brought them to closer supervision in order to further control this minority and prevent any unusual event. Another measure taken by Shah Abbas towards Zoroastrians which was followed by previous behavior and in fact completed it was persecution of their leaders to achieve their religious books. A letter dated 1019/1060 AH, which Yazd Zoroastrians wrote for Parsis by a person named Shahriar Sandal, reads: "in 997 (1036 AH), during the reign of heavenly Shah Abbas, so much harassment and persecution was made towards Dastooran that cannot be described and it came to the point that two people were killed. And to seek several religious books, they took several versions of Jamasbnameh and they wanted more, but it was not available. These harassments happened to us and God may bring good to the righteous." (Same, p.287).

About the causes of this incident, it is necessary to answer two questions based on a detailed examination of the letter contents: what was Jamasbnameh and why did Shah Abbas want to achieve it and all Zoroastrian religious books? In accordance with the traditions of Zoroastrianism, Jamasb, a member of Hugo family, was the minister of Kay Goshtasb and Zoroastrian's groom (Ashidari: 1965, p.227). He has been praised in the Avesta, and due to his demand from Zoroastrian to teach him foresight, became first and last Knower by drinking a cup of milk and passed illumination levels from beginning to end (Soroshian:1981, pp.172-173).

By reaching this position, Jamasb wrote a book named Jamasbname, which includes illumination's observations and predictions until resurrection and references has been made to importance of this book in horoscope and astrological books.

Therefore, Jamasb and Jamasbname became immortalized for Zoroastrians and through the predictions, kings always tried to achieve it (Shahrmardan: 1970, pp. 340-34).

From this description, Shah Abbas's measure to achieve Zoroastrian religious books, especially Jamasbname, and pressuring Zoroastrians, to the point of killing two of them can be noted from two aspects:

1. From the personality of Shah Abbas and his belief in the provisions of Astronomy
2. Akbar Shah and request of Zoroastrian books from Shah Abbas

Shah Abbas and his efforts in seeking authoritarian power over present and future, importance of Jamasbname and its possible predictions that could help in prevention of any event contrary to his interests and finally, his particular belief in astronomical provisions which is best represented in his obedience of his famous court astronomer, MollaJalaleddin Mohammad Yazdi, are the most important stimulating agents for his action (philosophical: 1979, p. 2/731). And in the second aspect, one of the reasons for this action can be found outside

the boundaries of Iran. This means that in India, Akbar Shah Goorkani made his court the reference of different religions and groups and tried to collect religious books of religions in his Royal Library. In this regard, since he couldn't reach Jamasbname and Zoroastrian religious monuments which Zoroastrian tried very hard to keep hidden, he asked Shah Abbas for help, and due to Zoroastrians resistance, he tried to achieve his aim by force and even killing two Zoroastrians in Yazd.

Conclusion:

Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians and Hindus are among non-Muslim religious minorities in Shah Abbas reign. Despite the strict attitude of Shah Abbas towards Sunnis, he was very kind to followers of other religions, particularly Christians. Overall, Shah Abbas I adopted a liberal policy in dealing with non-Muslim religious minorities in his scope of authority, and in contrast with kings before him, took the policy of tolerance towards religious minorities during his reign. During his kingdom, all religions, from Jewish to Zoroastrian and Esau, each had their own neighborhood in every city and lived according to their customs with total freedom. Christian minority in particular, had the highest rate of religious freedom and was in support of Shah Abbas. Thereby, active presence of many Armenians, especially in economic and trade terms, increased growth of ambassadors and missionaries traveling to Iran and establishment of churches and monasteries by this minority can be seen. Also, special attention of Shah Abbas to Christians was due to political aspects and especially good relationship with western countries which led to development of foreign trade.

About Zoroastrian it should be said that, although forced transfer of large group of Zoroastrian of Yazd to Isfahan, and persecution of its leaders in Yazd expresses the arbitrary behavior of kings towards subordinates, which were rejected by majority, however, in a general comparison with weakness and power era of Safavie, Yazd Zoroastrians were far more relaxed like other minorities. It can be said that Shah Abbas I, in comparison with his before and after kings, provided greater freedom and well-being for religious minorities.

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