

[Report and Opinion]

## The importance of Guilan silk and its economic significance at Safavid period in Caspian region

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### ABSTRACT

Guilan province is located in north of Iran. It plays an important natural, economic and strategic role in Iranian history due to its geographical location between the Caspian Sea and the Alborz Mountain. This particular characteristic of Guilan has made it one of the most important political centers in its history and in the history of its struggles against the central government of Iran. Iran neighborhood with Russia and Caucasia during the Safavid Dynasty has added to Guilan economic significance. Guilan silk in the Safavid era made Iran well known as far as most of traders and tourists and orientalist who traveled to Iran have pointed to it in their writings. In this study, the importance of this strategic merchandise are investigated and discussed from the viewpoint of economics, income creation, commerce, tolls, customs as well as its export, taxes, products and the commercial routes.

**Keywords:** Iran, Guilan, Russia, Safavids, Silk.

### INTRODUCTION

#### Silk in Iran

Among the silk producing countries in the past, Iran has been considered as one of the most important countries in the world. Iran's plain and shot silk were renowned in the farthest corners of the ancient world and its only matching competitor was the Chinese silk. Having an authority over the Silk Road which began from China and connected Iran to the Mediterranean and Europe, Iran made silk become more well known. Although Iranians' knowledge about silk dates back to older times, history shows that the rearing of silk worms was widely practiced towards the end of the Sassanid era. For example, Marv city is known as one of the oldest regions of Iran that produced silk. Since the sixth century A. D. to the tenth century A. D., silkworm culturists in Marv used newly-generated silkworms which were by then a locally customized breed to produce and export raw silk, thread, scarf and all sorts of clothing. Later, this industry found its way from Marv to Turkmenistan, Astarabad and Gorgan and then to Mazandaran and

Guilan. (Petroshefski, 1965; P: 297)

The production of silk in the northern parts of Iran (the southern cities of the Caspian Sea) drew the attention of Muslim geographers of the fourth century A.H. (tenth century A.D) so much that they often mentioned it in their travel accounts.

Ibn Houqal, Estakhri, Yaqut Hamavi, Jayhani, Ibn Faqih and Ghazvini each have mentioned Tabarestani and Gorgani silks and their export to other regions. (Ibn Houqal, 1970; PP: 123 , 124)

Among the big markets dealing in silk in these areas, the Abeskun Island in the Caspian Sea can be mentioned, which has a special silk market. It was considered one of the important commercial ports in the Caspian Sea with a commercial route to Guilan. (Estakhri, 1982; p: 144) After the spread of silkworm rearing to the Caspian Sea regions, it was gradually taken to Central Iran. Further, in a period between the fourth century A.H. and the tenth century A.H. (equivalent to the eleventh century A. D. and the eighteenth century A.D.), silk was produced in most parts of Iran.

### The Importance of Silk Production in Guilan

One of the Northern parts of Iran that became famous for the production of silk was Guilan. The name 'Guilan' has popped up several times in the writings of geographers as one of the silk-producing areas. (Hodoudol Alam, p: 143) In the seventh century A.H, (fourteenth century A.D.), Ghazvini wrote:

"Guilan has silk and women are busy rearing silkworm." (Ghazvini, Zakaria- bin - Mohammad - bin - Mahmud Asar - al - Belad Va Akhbar - al - Ebad, 1987 p: 127) Of course, until the seventh century A.H. (the fourteenth century A.D.) the plain/raw silk of Gorgan and Tabarestan (Mazandarn) was considered so much better than Guilan silk as far as even until the beginning of the present century that the raw silk of Lahijan in Guilan was regarded as an inferior product. In this regard, Yaghut Hamavi, who was contemporary to these times, wrote, "Silk was not of high quality in Lahij or Lahijan". (ibid, p: 105)

Nevertheless, during seventh century A.H. (fourteenth century A.D.), improvements were made in the type and quality of the Guilan silk. The reason may be attributed to the rearing of a new generation of silkworms that drew the attention of the tourists as well as orientalist and various merchants. (Bartold, *et al*, 1924; p:178).

Regarding Guilan Silk, Marco polo wrote, "Recently, merchants from Genoa travel especially to Guilan to purchase cocoons or the locally called 'ghelle' and send it to their countries." (Marco polo, 1971; p:31)

The rearing of silkworms and silk weaving was prevalent during the rule of Ilkhanids Dynasty and after that it was thriving in many parts of Iran including Gorgan, Tabarestan and Guilan. Mentioning the areas of Iran which were engaged in rearing cocoons, Hamdollah Mostofi - the Iranian historian - named various cities including Jorjan, Kabud, Jamed and Astar Abad in Gilan and Mazandaran. "Silk is one of the products of all four cities mentioned above". (Mostofi, Hamdollah, 1987; PP: 203-4)

As regards to other parts of Guilan province such as Shaft and Neysar (Nisar), it has been noted that they were like other parts of Guilan regarding their products.

This meant that raw silk was also produced in these regions.

Clavikho, the especial envoy of the king of Spain to the 'Timourids court' referred to Guilan silk in his travel accounts and stated that all kinds of silk and silk clothing were sent to Sultaniyeh and from there to other regions (including the markets of Genoa). (Clavijo, Sir. Alfonso Di Clavijo,s, 1998; p:66) Baldosi Pegoletti, from Florence of Italy, in his book wrote on commerce and trade published in 1335 A. D. has talked about Gilan silk. (Lafon & H.L. Rabinho, 1974; pp. 472-5)

Josepha Barbaro, the Ambassador of Venice to Iran, who came to Iran during the era of Uzun Hasan of the Aq-Qoyunlu Dynasty, noted that the best silk was produced in Astarabad. He mentioned the great number of people in the coastline of the Caspian Sea weaving silk clothes.

When trade ties between Iran and Europe prospered after the Ilkhanid era and Iran began its activities such as export and import of goods from and to Europe, the European and other countries found a leeway to introduce their commercial activities to Iran. Hence, one of the important products attracting their interest was silk and silk-made products (such as textile and fabrics) as well as silk-woven carpets and rugs. It was obvious that one of the geographical locations attracting their attention and requirements was Guilan and the silk producing regions of northern Iran.

Many representatives and agencies of foreign companies and a number of European traders themselves traveled freely to these areas during the Safavid Dynasty. They purchased as much silk as they wished. Marco polo, the well-known Italian traveler who traveled to Iran during the end of the seventh century A.H. (fourteenth century A.D.), mentioned the Genovian traders who sailed in the Caspian Sea and were constantly engaged in significant commercial activities with Iran, transacting silk with the people of Guilan. (Marco polo, *ibid*, P: 31& 35)

Most probably, their most important trade route must have been from Astrakhan (Hashthtarkhan) to the cities of Guilan such as Langrud and Anzali port.

Jemeli Karri was a merchant who established a shipping line for delivering the silk of northern Iran and China to

Europe through the rivers Don and Volga. The Genoese Merchants too had their own plan for the export of Guilan silk through the Caspian Sea. (Gabriel. *Alfornice*, 1968; PP: 56-8)

Finally, the Venetians succeeded in making a political-commercial contract with the Ilkhanid rulers giving them the right to freely travel and trade all over the Ilkhanid territories under full protection by road officials. The aim of the Italian merchants and traders was primarily the purchase of Chinese silk and then Iranian silk - especially from the northern parts of Iran. Apparently, the Chinese silk - in type and price- was no match to the silk of Talesh in Guilan. Guilan silk was produced in huge volumes and was a source of much interest for the European merchants. (Bartold, vol: 1, P: 64)

#### **The Guilanian Silk and Its Significance during the Safavid Era**

During the Safavid era, especially in the reign of Shah Abbas the 1st, silk gained great importance. Political stability, strong centralization of the government, domestic security, in particular the safety of roads and routes, paved the way for the entrance of the economy of Iran to the path of prosperity and glory. One of the special and vivid characteristics of Iran's economy in this period was the growth of trade and commerce. Undoubtedly, silk had a vital role in the growth and prosperity of the economy of the Safavid era. The major natural product of the Safavid era in Iran was silk; forming the largest and most important merchandise of Iran.

Silk production of the Safavid era was largely supplied from the northern provinces (i.e. Astarabad or Gorgan, Mazandaran and Guilan) and to a lesser extent from cities such as Ardebil, Shervan, Shamakhi, Qarabagh, Khorasan and Yazd. Of course, Guilan silk was of greater importance and held a greater share in the economy of the Safavid era. Thus, Guilan and Mazandaran were considered the significant provinces by the Safavid kings and Guilan silk became very famous in European countries and attracted the attention of foreign merchants. Part of the produced silk was exported overseas and the remaining was used to produce various delicate types of silk clothing.

Due to the vital role of Guilan and Mazandaran in the production of silk, Shah Abbas the 1st overthrew the local rulers and took a firm control over these gifted territories. His locally appointed representatives bought the silk products, stored them in the warehouses, and then traded them to the merchants and traders of foreign companies. The Safavid government established extensive commercial transactions with most foreign countries due to the variety of silk products. The government also dispatched trade representatives to some of the countries. These relationships were so extensive that Charden, while praising the expansion of commercial ties during the Safavid era, wrote, "Iranian merchants are engaged in commerce and have representatives in all places of the world taken from China to Sweden. (Charden, Jaun, 1957; p: 271)

Following the dispatch of ambassadors and representatives to European courts by Shah Abbas the 1st (996-1038 A.H.) to take up negotiations for the export of silk to those countries and coming of the representatives of those countries to Iran, a full swing competition for the purchase of Iranian silk began. One of the places the foreign companies tried to open up a company for their activities to run more efficiently and smoothly was Guilan. One of the major sources of revenues for the Safavid Shah's treasury was silk trade. The sale of silk brought in huge amounts of income for the Shah.

The trade of silk products, which was one of the major items of export during the Safavid era, also brought huge amounts of annual income into the country. Many customers from all over the world were drawn to Iran. The tax drawn from silk products, customs tax, and the change to safe passage of the goods by commercial convoys as well, led to a notable level of income that found its way to the government treasury.

It was due to these very interests rising from the sale of silk and the great role it played in the economy of the Safavid era that Shah Abbas the 1st monopolized it and, thus, silk became a strategic and vital product in the hands of the Shah. According to a report narrated by Olearius the tolls levied on some goods including

silk – was so notable that from the sale of each bale of silk, an equivalent of 30 marks [ten Toller] was drawn which found its way to the Shah's treasury. (Olearius, Adam, 1990; P: 168)

One of the areas paying the highest and greatest amount of tax for its great production was Guilan. Charden estimates an income of 2 million francs from tolls paid to the Safavid Shah by Guilan alone. This was because Guilan produced the greatest amount of silk in the country. (Charden; *ibid*, vol: 8, PP: 281, 292, 293)

Another important source of income for the Shah in the Safavid era was customs; again, Gilan provided a major portion of this income. Guilan was also a port for the export of silk.

Sanson reports: "Eighty thousand tomans (3,600,000 Liras) were earned as customs from Guilan for Suleiman Shah. A major part of this income was earned through the charges put on the silk products for export. The silk trade kept its success and bloom throughout the Safavid Dynasty. (Sanson, 1967; PP: 134 & 135)

Shah Abbas the 1st's policies expanded the production of silk, which had diminished to a large extent as a result of the wars between Iran and the Ottoman kingdom during the tenth century A.H. (seventeenth century A.D.).

Based on estimations, the production of silk in Iran amounted to 125 tonnes in 1618 A.D. Olearius, who visited Iran during the era of Shah Safi, gave an account of the production of silk in the most producing areas as follows:

"Guilan some 8000 bales; Shervan some 3000 bales; Khorasan some 3000 bales; Mazandarn some 2000 bales and Gharabagh some 2000 bales". (Olearius, *ibid*, PP: 668-9)

Therefore, the total production of silk in Iran was around 20000 bales annually (each bale was equivalent to 192 tons in those days) out of which one twentieth was consumed in Iran and the rest delivered to other countries by the British and Dutch ships. At the time of Charden - as he estimated himself - the production of silk was increased to 270 tons. That is; some 100000 bales were added to the production of this strategic good. From the latter production, 10000 bales came from Guilan; 2000 from Mazandaran, 3000 from

Khorasan and Azerbaijan each and 2000 each from Qarabagh and Georgia. The total tonnage of production of silk amounted to 22000 bales. (Charden, Jaun, *ibid*. P: 270)

During this period, Iranian silk, due to its high quality, enjoyed an increasingly competitive role as compared to Indian and Italian silk. Its upper hand was also to be seen in the Ottoman markets competing with the silk from Syria and Greece. The highest quality silk came from Guilan. Its 'Sherbaff' brand was unique in quality and made use of high-priced textile produced for export to Europe. In the Safavid era, Guilan, Mazandaran and Gorgan, which were the main regions of silk production in Iran, kept their supremacy. The Safavid kings paid particular attention to these regions due to their profits as far as according to Dellavalleh Pietro, Shah Abbas the 1st ordered the Georgian, Christian and Jewish immigrants of those territories to be engaged in silk production. He then continued to say; "Shah Abbas I transferred many Arermenian Christian families and Georgans to Guilan and Mazandaran to get engaged in the production of silk." (Dellavalleh, Pietro, 1969; P: 171)

The cities of Rasht, Lahijan and Fuman were the main centers of silk production in the province of Guilan. European travelers to Iran during this age had all referred to Guilan's silk, its importance and the amount of its production. The Englishman, Edwards, who traveled to Iran in 1567 A. D. reported that Guilan silk was much better in quality and a little cheaper than the silk from Caucasus. He set up a company near Rasht for silk trading. (Sheibani, *ibid*, P: 137)

Olearius expressed his amazement at the great number of mulberry trees in Guilan and the silkworm rearing having no match elsewhere in the world. (Olearius, *ibid*, P: 346)

In 1722 A. D., a Dutch traveler who had passed Haji Tarkhan (now called Astarakhan) informed Peter the Great of the noteworthy development of silk production in Iran. In his report, he stated that in 1721 A. D., 1,200,000 pounds of Guilan silk was delivered to Ottoman Empire (Turkey) at the price of 3,200,000 rubles. He consequently encouraged the supervision of Peter the Great over the trade of Guilan Silk. Only it was then that Peter recognized the economic significance

of Guilan as a center of silk trade.

### **The Routes of Silk Export**

Due to the importance of silk trading in the Safavid era, great effort and attention was given to the safe passage and the route of this merchandise. The British Company 'Avant' took the route from Halab; the East Indian Company chose the Persian Gulf and round Africa as its passage route and the Russian Company named 'Moscovite' opted for the Russian route. The Russian contemporary to Shah Abbas the 1st wished all the silk produced in Guilan and the southern parts of the Caspian Sea to be sent to Russia through the Sea so that the British, the Dutch, the Venitian merchants and traders from other European countries would be forced to purchase their needed silk from Russian merchants. For this purpose, Mikhaeil Romanov, the Russian Tsar, dispatched an envoy to the Shah Abbas the 1st's court towards the end of 1037 A.H. (1618 A.D.) and suggested the signing of a special contract between the two countries so that the silk productions of the northern parts of Iran would be delivered to Russia through the Caspian Sea. Shah Abbas the 1st, as a sign of good will, ordered 50 bales of pure silk to be sent back to Russia in the company of the envoy but made the formation of a contract conditional upon his own private study and analysis of the situation. (Falsafi, Nasrollah, 1960; vol:5, p: 133)

The silk production of Iran was sent to Europe mostly through Asia Minor; Georgia; the Black Sea and the Mediterranean whenever there was a ceasefire between Shah Abbas the 1st and the Ottoman King. However, if there was a war between the two kingships, the goods were taken to England through Gamberoon Port (Bandar Abbas), the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean by Portuguese and Spanish ships. Regarding the animosity of the Ottoman kingship towards the Safavids and their permanent struggles and conflicts, and due to the fact that the most important, and convenient commercial routes passed through Iraq and Syria and ended in the Mediterranean ports, and the route to Istanbul passed through Anatoly, both of which were in the domains of the Ottoman territories, a third route was thought of that went round the Ottoman

lands. This route started in Guilan and reached Hashtar Khan through the Caspian Sea, and then, through the Volga River, found its way by land to Ukraine. (Sivori, Rojer, 1973, p:176)

During the reign of the Safavid Dynasty, Hashtar Khan (Astarakhan) played a vital role in the transactions of Iran and the East. This commercial route was first established by Ivan IV for the use of merchants and the Russians when he conquered Astarakhan in 1554 A.D. and Volga came under the authority of the Russians. Whenever the Ottomans and the Safavids were engaged in battles, the Guilan - Hashtarkhan - Southern Russia route became of great importance. The convoys were obliged to pay road taxes and customs charges at checkpoints in the Iranian land as well as that of the Ottomans. The international trade through this route was varied and extensive. Brocades, enamored cloths, untanned leather, Morrocan leather, velvets and most of the silk were exported through Guilan to Moscow and from there to Poland that normally ended up in Europe. (ibid, P: 176)

With the increasing importance of silk trade during the eighteenth century, the Russian government paid much interest and attention to the southern frontline of the Caspian Sea and, apart from political aspirations, one of the main reasons that Peter the Great decided to capture Guilan and Mazandaran was the profitable trade of silk.

### **CONCLUSION**

Guilan has enjoyed the status of being one of the most important producers of silk in Iran during various historical phases. A great portion of its taxes paid to central governments was supplied by the huge transactions of silk. Silk weaving factories in Guilan have produced all sorts of silken clothing, satins, velvets, brocades etc., throughout the years. The northern territories of Iran, especially Guilan, have been the center of silk weaving and Iranian silk industry owes its reputation and supremacy to the Guilan silk. Although during the opening centuries of Islam, silk was gradually produced in other areas of Iran too, Guilan always stood on top and produced the major portion of silk exports. Thereafter, Iranian silk gained such velour and importance that it turned into a luxury

commodity for the Europeans engaged in business both in Iran and in the Ottoman Empire. In fact, silk played a multifarious, crucial role in the commercial picture of Iran and Guilan as the dear pearl of this prosperous business. The commercial importance of silk has also been one of the reasons of interest drawn by the Russian Tsar to Guilan.

#### Notes:

1. Each bale is equivalent to 276 Lira and each lira is equivalent to approximately half a Kilo.

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## اهمیت ابریشم گیلان و نقش اقتصادی آن در دوران صفویه در ناحیه خزر

ع. پناهی، ح. کهنسال واجارگاه

### چکیده

گیلان به جهت واقع شدن بین دریای کاسپین (مازندران) و رشته کوه‌های البرز موقعیت مهمی از نظر طبیعی، اقتصادی و استراتژیکی پیدا کرده است. این ویژگی خاص گیلان موجب شده تا در طول تاریخ این ایالت یکی از کانون‌های مهم سیاسی در تاریخ ایران علیه حکومت‌های مرکزی تبدیل شود، همسایگی این ایالت در عصر صفوی با روسیه و قفقاز بر اهمیت اقتصادی آن نیز افزوده است. در دوره صفوی علاوه بر این ویژگی‌ها - که هر کدام مقوله‌ای قابل بررسی می‌باشد. تولید و تجارت ابریشم گیلان در دوره‌های مختلف تاریخی بر اهمیت و شهرت جهانی این ایالت افزوده است. ابریشم گیلان در دوره صفوی موجب کسب آوازه، برای کشور ایران، در میان مردم دیگر کشورها گردید و غالب سیاحانی که به ایران مسافرت نموده، یا برای تجارت به این سرزمین وارد شده‌اند، از ابریشم گیلان سخن گفته‌اند. اهمیت این کالای مهم در جنبه اقتصادی و درآمدزایی، تجارت، عوارض، گمرک و صادرات آن، مالیات، فرآورده‌های ابریشمی، و نیز مسیرهای تجارت آن مورد بررسی است؛ که در این پژوهش به اجمال در این باره بحث خواهد شد.