

THE SAFAVID AND NON SAFAVID PRETENDERS

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ABSTRACT

Following the fall of the Safavids, the whole country was infected with anarchy and disorder. As the Iranians showed great trust in the Safavids during their two hundred and thirty years reign, throughout the Afghan reign in Iran, there happened many risings and resistance movements by individuals pretending to have relationship with the Safavid dynasty. The main features of this period are continuous wars, famine, plundering, slump and the encroaching of the Ottomans and Russians. People supported those having Safavid lineage. Among all these pretenders, only Tahmasb Mirza was true heir of dynasty and Seyyed Ahmad Mirza was a relative of the family. The rest including three Safi Mirzas, two Ismail Mirzas and Seyyed Hassan and Mohammad were some pseudo Safavid pretenders who were supported by the local chiefs.

KEY WORDS

Fall, Safavids, anarchy, slaughter, plunder, Afghans, local resistance, Ashraf, pretenders, Sultan Hussein, Tahmasb, Seyyed Ahmad, Safi Mirza, Esmail Mirza.

Introduction:

The local and regional resistance put up to protect the revival of the Safavids may be examined from various viewpoints. The appearance of the right and pseudo-Safavid pretenders is a consequence of the specific socio-historical situation of this period. Further, the pretenders should be analyzed regarding their geographic scattering during the seven years of Afghan rule in Iran.

Undoubtedly, the Iranian society had regained its identity through the rise of Safavids, an independent identity with increasing prestige which was endangered by the invasion of Afghans to Iran. The rule of Afghans and especially Mahmud Afghan's coming to the throne resulted in an overall unrest and disorder in the country, and the opponents on the west and the east were driven by greed for other territories.¹

In his *Alamaraye Naderi*, Mohammad Kazem Marvi gives a good description of this period. When Iran underwent great changes for bad, some of Sayen khani Turkmans of Marv, Jeyhun, and Jorjan and Qebchaq plane invaded Khorassan and Mazandaran. Further, Lezghis of Daghestan cooperated with Sarkhay Lezghis and captured Shirvan. Mahmud Afghan took hold of Arak Shah Tahmasb the second left Isfahan for Qazvin and after a while for Azerbaijan.

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1. Mohammad Kazem Marvi, *Alamaraye Naderi*, vol. 1, edited by Mohammad Amin Riahi (Tehran: Elmi, 1374, 3rd edition), p.5.

Having heard the news of anarchy in Iran, the Ottomans invaded Georgia, Kermanshahan, Hamedan, and some parts of Azerbaijan so that Shah Tahmasb had to leave Azerbaijan and headed for Astarabad and Mazandaran. Prior to his leaving Azerbaijan, Tahmasb the second sent an envoy to Russians and ceded some parts of Mazandaran, Guilan and Astarabad to the Russians to soft soap them. Subsequently, the Russians sent ten thousand forces to Guilan and get hold of it.²

Iranians had always considered the Afghans as frontier tribes and were deeply wounded by their hold of the political power. The resultant of which was the various risings in different parts of the country. This fact must be considered in the context of emergence of different pretenders. Some researchers interpret these risings as the nationalist resistance to the foreign invasion. This is not true; the Afghan invasion to central Iran was not unprecedented and the Afghans were not regarded as foreign nation, they were even present in geo political frontiers of Iran to mid 19th century.

The Iranians suffered dreadful years during the Afghan reign: some people had lost their lives in the battles and uprisings, some because of famine and high prices, and epidemics. Meanwhile, there were cases of selling of women and children. Homes and abodes were destroyed and the properties were plundered and due to the wars fought in the country and the ravages of the robberies and the spread of disorders, the trade came to a standstill too.

The risings and rebels of those who pretended to be Shah Sultan Hussein's son or relative indicate the confused state of the country. The pretenders of Afghan period were doubtlessly some power hungry chiefs who wished to misuse or overuse the disorderly state.

The Safavid and non-Safavid Pretenders

As explained before, the fall of the Safavids led to such anarchy, murder and plunder so that most people wished for the establishment of peace and order. Thus they supported the return of a pretender preferably a Safavid one to found a new government. Some of these pretenders enjoyed the support of the local people and captured the cities and the fortresses. In some cases they even succeeded to invade the Ottoman army. It should be noted that the main power was in the hands of governors and the local chiefs, and depending on their fame and legitimacy, they ventured to take control of the whole country. Their success in the persuasion of people indicates the sincere longing of Iranians who resorted to them to obtain freedom and to get free from the yoke of the suppressors, and if their endeavors had been centered on Tahmaseb Mirza, they would have probably been saved much earlier³.

2. *Alamaraye Naderi*, pp.47, 48.

3. Laurence Lockhart, *Enqeraze, Selseleye Safavieh va Ayyaam Estilaye Afagheneh dar Iran*, tarjomeh Mostafaqoli Emad(Tehran: Tahuri, 1364), p.344.

The support given by Iranians to the Safavid pretenders was because of the legitimacy they had gained during 228 years of reign in Iran. Declaring the Shiite as the official religion of Iran, they had altered the religious structure of the country. The rule of Afghans was threatening the beliefs of the people. So, to be set free from these propagations and threats, people supported the Safavid members. In the first half of 18th century which John R. Perry describes as a "mire of riot"⁴, various individuals appeared on the scene and tried their chance for taking the power in their hands. Mohammad Ali Hazin Lahiji observes that: "regardless of the plunderers, they were eighteen people holding forces and servants, who claimed authority and kingship"⁵ Perry had thought that all these eighteen pretenders belonged to the Safavid family, while Hazin meant it the overall number of pretenders whether Safavid or non-Safavid. In the history books of Nader Shah and his successors' reign at least the names of twelve of these individuals have been mentioned.⁶

Through investing Mahmud Afghan with the royal crown, Shah Sultan Hussein brought an end to the life of the central government in Isfahan. However, the Safavids were not perished altogether. There were elements of this dynasty that were active in the political arena, but they were not but mere tools. The following years of Safavids henceforth are small and unimportant. Mahmud Afghan had found out that it was important to keep the deposed Shah alive. So, subsequent to his dominance in Isfahan (1722-1723), he imprisoned Shah Hussein and the other princes.⁷ And in order to prove himself as a legitimate and lawful king and a true successor to the Safavids, he married to the ex shah's daughter.⁸ The respectful confinement of the princes known as *damur qapu* (iron door) of Safavids was replaced by life imprisonment under the Afghans and the prison guards were changed only. The imprisonments still went on until when Mahmud was affected by mental disorder.

The various riots in every corner of the country and the relative success of some leaders along with the Russian and the Ottoman encroaching in the north, north east and the west of the country, all in all led to the deterioration of Mahmud Afghan's mental state. The news of Safi Mirza's flight from the harem and his taking refuge in the Bakhtiaries incurred his wrath to the point of massacring of the Safavid princes.⁹ The number of the victims varies in

4. J.R. Perry. "The Last Safavids". Iran. IX (1971), p.54.

5. Mohammad Ali Hazin Lahiji, *Tarikh va Safarnameh Hazin* edited by Ali Davani(Tehran: Markaz Asnad Enqelab Eslami, 1375), p. 206

6. The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 6, The Timurid and Safavid, Peter Jackson and the Late Laurence Lockhart, eds. Cambridge University Press, 1986. p. 326.

7. Mirza Mohammad Khalil Marashi Safavi, *Majma_al_Tavarikh*, edited by Abbas Eqbal Ashtiani(Tehran: Tahuri va Sanai, 1362) p. 59 .

8. Petros di Serkiss Guilannetz, *Soqute Esfahan*, tarjomeh Mohammad Mehryar , introduction by Lockhart(Esfahan, Golha, 1344)p. 61.

9. De Serse, *Soqute Shah Sultan Hussein* translated by Vali_ollah Shadan(Tehran: Ketabsara,

different sources; Mostofi refers to 18 people¹⁰, Krowsinsky 159¹¹, and Hazin 39⁹, of which the latter's seems closer to the reality as he was leaving in Isfahan at the time of these events. Mahmud was so much afraid of the Safavid king's escape so that he even murdered the three old uncles of the king"¹².

The Safavid Pretenders

Some sources observe the claims of many pretenders and their relation to the Safavids (in some cases the individuals who claimed to be Safi Mirza or Esmail Mirza amounted to three people) as unfounded, and point that only the claims of Tahmasb the second and Seyyed AliMirza cannot be denied.¹³

Tahmasb Mirza. When Isfahan was under the siege of Mahmud's forces, the notable courtiers were considering the appointment of a crown prince for Shah Sultan Hussein. They had truly found out the importance of nominating a crown prince. The chiefs and the influential people would gather around him and would repel the intrigues. At first, Shah Sultan Hussein's elder son Mahmud Mirza and then Safi Mirza were chosen. Some sources refer to the latter as Bahram Mirza¹⁴. Later on the news of the flight of this prince ended in the murder of the other Safavid princes (perhaps the rise of some pretenders with the same name and the support of people is indicative of his not being in Isfahan at the time of murder). Safi Mirza left his office 15 days after the appointment and entered the harem. Eventually, Tahmasb Mirza was appointed and fled with some courtiers from Isfahan and became a symbol of resistance against the Afghan dominance.

Mirza Seyyed Ahmad. Son of Mirza Qassem and the grandson of Mirza Davud, the administrator of the holy shrine of Imam Reza at Meshed, he was related to the Safavids through his mother. Mirza Davud had married to Shahrbanu Beigum, the eldest daughter of Shah Suleiman and Mirza Qassem's sister (Seyyed Ahmad's aunt) was Shah Sultan Hussein's wife.¹⁵ So from one side he was descended from Sheikh Safi-addin Ardebili, and from the other side from Mir Qavam-addin Marashi. This lineage was enough to have the support of the public. At the beginning he cooperated with Tahmasb Mirza, but when it turned up that the young Shah indulges in sensual pleasures, he parted with him went to Iraq and entered Abarqu and through the help of his

1364)p. 266.

10. Mohammad Mohsen Mostofi, *Zobdatol_Tavarikh*, edited by Behruz Gudarzi(Tehran: Bonyade Moqafate Afshar, 1375)p. 170.

11. Tadoziva Krosinsky, *Safarnameh Krosinsky*, translated by Abdolrazaq Donboli(Tehran: tus, 1363)p. 78.

11. Hazin, *ibid*, p.207.

12. De Sersoi, *ibid*. p. 267.

13. The Cambridge History of Iran, vol. 6. p.326.

14. *Alamaraye Naderi*, vol. 1.p; 29.

15. Hashem Mirza, *Zabur al Davud*, edited by AbdolHossein Navai(Tehran: Miras Maktub, 1378)p; 82.

assistants issued orders with a false sign and seal of Shah Tahmasb, and sent to Fars chiefs. The diaries of Dutch East Indian company members in Iran indicate that he was active in Fars, Dashtestan and Persian Gulf regions.¹⁶ Tahmasb Mirza ordered to kill him, but Seyyed Ahmad managed to inflict a defeat on Shah Tahmasb's forces and headed for Kerman, and called himself king and minted coins in his own name in 1727-1728. When he established his power in Kerman, spread his dynasty and forgot the Afghans and revival of the Safavids as Tahmasb Mirza did. Further, in order to provide for the vast expenses of his court he imposed heavy tax on people. He arrested and imprisoned some of the important banyans (the Indian dealers who brokered for the foreign merchants).¹⁷ Eventually, he was defeated in a battle with the Afghans, had to remove the crown and the aigrette hastily and made his escape in disguise. "He found out that it would be a very hard situation to engage in a war without having deep roots within people, so he decided to compromise with Tahmasb and reassure him of his friendly thoughts.¹⁸ However, he was faced with the forces sent to suppress him so he left for Siestan, Kerman and Lar and Jarun. He was thinking of fleeing to India but his adventurous soul brought him back to Fars, and when suffered a defeat from Mohammad Khan Baluch, he took sanctuary in Darab fortress and was surrendered by Tamur Khan to Ashraf Afghan in 1728 and was put to death near Zayandehrud.

The non Safavid Pretenders

During the seven years of Afghan reign in Iran, three individuals claimed to be Shah Sultan Hussein's son, Safi Mirza. Again the role of local notables might be traced in their emergence. **The First Safi Mirza** was supported by the governor of Bakhtiari, Alimardan Khan and the other great chiefs of Haft Lang tribe. During the siege of Isfahan, Alimardan had asked the Shah to send him his most deserved sons so that he enters the scene as the commandant of liberating forces.¹⁹ But when he heard the news of Tahmasb Mirza's being appointed as a crown prince and his movement towards Qazvin, he introduced an anonymous person as Safi Mirza and gathered some people around him and even engaged in a battle against the Ottomans and inflicted a defeat on them. Then Alimardan brought the false Safi Mirza to throne in Hamedan and minted coin in his name. However having found out that he intends to get out of the influence of local chiefs, he hatched a plot to kill him, 1727.

The Second Safi Mirza came from Garai tribe who entered Khalilabad of Bakhtiari and claimed to be the son of Shah Sultan Hussein. There was no

16. Willem Felour, *Ashraf Afghan bar Takhatgahe Esfahan* (as narrated by Dutch eyewitnesses), translated by Aboulqassem Serri (Tehran, Tus, 1367) p. 50.

17. Roger Seyvori, *Iran e Asr e Safavi*, translated by Kambiz Azizi (Tehrn: Nashre Markaz, 1372)p.171.

18. Reza Shabani, *Tarikhe Ejtemaie Iran dar Asr e Afsharieh*, vol. 1 (Tehran: Qomes, 1373, 2nd edition)p. 20.

19. Lockhart, *ibid.* p.185.

doubt that this was absolute lie and his Persian accent proved that. As the language of Safavid court was Turkish. He came to throne in Dehdasht and minted coin in Tahmasb Mirza' name. He succeeded to gather twenty thousand forces around himself, and captured Shushtar, Khorramabad and defeated the Ottomans in some battles. He would wear black cloths and ride on donkeys and would say that he had made a vow not to take off his black wearing and not to ride a horse until when the Afghans had been removed from the country.²⁰ Tahmasb Mirza heard the news of his fame in Meshed and through letters to Bakhtiari and Kohguiluyeh chiefs ordered to kill him which was carried out in Dehdasht.

The Third Safi Mirza's real name was Mohammad Ali Rafsanjani who rose in the south east of Tehran in 1729-1730 and made Shushtar the seat of his government.²¹ The grounds of his emergence indicate the socioeconomic situation of the Iran; the Russian political agent in Iran, Bratishov refers to him as having a peasant origin and all people were aware of this.²² The governor of Shushtar did not join him, so he left for Howeizeh, and Basra and eventually Baghdad. The governor of Baghdad sent him to Constantinople and there he was faced with kind greetings. As it is written in a letter to the governor of Kares²³ the Ottomans knew of his false origins and assuming the impossible that he is a prince²⁴, they thought it is better to keep this as pretext which was manipulated under the Afshars.

The First Esmail Mirza was a wanderer known as Zeinal ibn Ebrahim from Lahijan who gathered a number of Safavids around him in the town of Tonokabon and dreamed of becoming a king and called himself Esmail Mirza, another son of Shah Sultan Hussein.²⁵ He captured some districts of Deilaman and when conquered Lahijan, minted coin in his name. He was defeated in a battle with the commander in chief of Guilan and went to Moghan. Following some clashes with the Russians, he retreated to Khalkhal. Again some people gathered around him and captured Ardebil and Moghanat. Joined by some Shahsevan and Shaqaqi tribesmen, he defeated the Ottomans and was raised in his position.²⁶ Eventually, he suffered a defeat from the Ottomans and went to Guilan. As Guilan was at the hands of the Russians, he went to Massuleh and was murdered by the Shahsevans now united with the Russians.

20. Mostofi, *ibid.* p. 174.

21. Mirza Mehdi Khan Astarabadi, *Tarikhe Jahangoshaye Naderi*, edited by Abdollah Anvar (Tehran: Anjoman Asare Melli, 1341)p.23.

22. M. R. Aronova and K. Z. Ashrafian, *Dowlate Nader Shah Afshar*, translated by Hamid Momeni (Tehran: Shabguir, 1356, 2nd edition)p.169.

23. Town located in the Ottoman_ Armenia frontier at Safavids, now in Turkey.

24. *Asnad va Mokatebate Tarikhi Iran dar doreye Afsharieh*, vol. 1. Edited by Mohammad Reza Nassiri (Rasht: Jahade Daneshgahi, 1364)p.158.

25. *Alamaraye Naderi*, vol. 1. p.50.

26. Lockhart, *ibid.* p. 346.

The Second Esmail Mirza appeared in Kohguiluyeh, 1732-1133, and pretended to be Shah Sultan Hussein's son but he was captured by the pseudo-Safi Mirza who rose in Kohguiluyeh and cut off his nose and ears. He came to Isfahan and sojourned in Abbasabad and claimed to have relations to the Safavids. At this time Shah Tahmasb having defeated the Ottomans, entered Isfahan. Some of notables having believed Esmail Merza's lineage, planned a secret plan to remove Tahmasb and enthrone him. But the plot was betrayed and foiled and Tahmasb ordered to murder Esmail Mirza. It is evident that the courtiers played a main role in this current. Perhaps those who witnessed the increasing trend of Tahmasb's power, decided to weaken the Shah and empower a new Shah to strengthen their position.

Seyyed Hassan came from Farah to Qandhar and entered Isfahan with the Afghans in a dervish's apparel and after a while "the overuse of bhang made him feel inclined to monarchy"²⁷. He restored to Janaki tribes of Bakhtiari and called himself Shah Sultan Hussein's brother and attempted to take the power in his hands but was killed by the Afghans.

The Last Pretender appeared in Shamil district of Minab area. The first mention of him comes from a Dutch source in 1725-1726 that a man by name of Mohammad Mirza pretends to be Shah Sultan Hossein's eldest son and lives near to Bandar Abbas.²⁸ Mohammd Kazem writes: "a man with a saddled donkey was engaged in trade in the warm country of Shamil and the ports ... and joined with some rascals pretended to be the martyred king Shah Sultan Hussein."²⁹ Lockhart points out: "Mohammad Mirza appeared in Baluchestan and became successful to the point that he became known as the donkey riding prince."³⁰ An influential man called Mir Jahangir was effective in the rise of Mohammad Mirza. Though some of his devotees professed that he is the martyred king's brother, but his track record proved his false lineage."Mir Jahangir asked him to call himself the king and mint coin in his name."³¹

"He was more subject to his followers' wishes than being their leader and chief. After a while he gathered about one thousand men and captured the ports but was defeated by another pretender, Seyyed Ahmad Shah and fled to Baluchestan. In 1727-1728 Ashraf heard of his power and sent a force of 20000 men to punish him. Eventually he was defeated and made his escape to India. He had a nice handwriting and showed this as proof of noble origin.

Conclusion. Though the movements of all these pretenders shed rays of hope in the lives of desperate people, it intensified the disorder, poverty, and unrest. The records bear witness that an unprecedented state of anarchy and

27. Alamaraye Naderi, vol.1, p. 49.

28. Wilem Flour, *ibid.* p. 107.

29. Alamaraye Naderi, vol. 1. p.50.

30. Lockhart, *ibid.* p. 347.

31. Alamaraye Naderi, *ibid.*p.50.

wretchedness ruled all over owing to the usurpation of the country by the Afghans and invasions of the Russians and the Ottomans and deeds of some insurgents, including Malak Mahmud Sistani and other pretenders.

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