Assessments concerning the decline and the fall of Safavides: a Comparative analysis

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Abstract

The thesis describes the decline of the Safavid dynasty. It covers very important issues around the reasons of the Safavid dynasty collapse. Sources provide rich references on foreign policy problems, arbitrariness of nobles, tax burden deterioration, social conflicts, feudal wars, poverty in peasantry and so on. However, when exploring the reasons of historical events, eyewitnesses in their works are confined by only describing personal characters of distinct historical figures. The historiography of that period, in general, does not strive for identifying reasons of social-economic and political developments and outlining interconnections between historical events. They give preference to personal factors. This tendency is discerned with all authors of primary sources: Iranian or Caucasian authors, Russian diplomats or European missioners.

The thesis discusses and compiles sources of the last Safavids period and scientific literature related to that Period. As a result, we can observe the gradual decadency of the Safavid state and then comprehensive and evident picture of full destruction. Both historians of the 19th and 20th centuries and contemporary western and eastern researchers adhere to a certain consensus around this issue. Their opinion, in practice, does not differ from the Safavids contemporary historians’, but the accents outlined by scientists of various periods are also important.

Keywords: The Last Safavids – decline

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At the end of the XVII century, Iran fell into economic frustration, first, and then, naturally, political deterioration also came along. Social tensions, heavy taxation policies had mainly driven those developments. As a result, the agriculture, handicraft and trading activities saw slowdown and the urban life went out of order, in general.

The economic difficulties of the Safavid Iran deepened after, at the end of the XVII century, western European countries set full control over the navigation lines from Europe to India around the islands of Africa. As a result, the ground caravan tracks across Iran lost their previous value and importance. This tendency badly affected Iran's transit trade and the welfare of Iranian cities. Even the ruling period of Shah Sulayman (1666-1694) demonstrates preconditions of Iran's descent. In that period, the Dutch conquered the island of Keshmi in the Persian Gulf.

All these tendencies took deeper roots under the ruling of Shah Sultan Husayan (1694-1722), who turned out a weak ruler. A part of historians asserts that the Safavid State collapsed because of his weakness and incapability.

First of all, we will make focus on assessments provided by that period's authors regarding the existing developments:

Artemi Volinski, the resident Minister and Governor of Astrakhan, the Russian Empire Ambassador to Iran, writes about Shah Sultan Husayan: “You will hardly meet another similar fool among not only monarchs, but even ordinary people. He cares for no affairs and relies on I’timad Al-Dawlah in everything”. (Pigulevskaya, 1958:308) Polish missioner Tadeusz Krusinski points out that the Monarch, who considered his Harem as a separate kingdom and conceded the state power to the Harem eunuchs, could not care for the kingdom welfare. (nat’roshvili, 1991:456)

Dutch painter Cornelius, who arrived in Iran in the XVIII century and painted the famous portrait of Shah Sultan Husayn on papers of his own diary, writes the following about Shah Sultan Husayn: “This monarch was so much women-chaser that he is leading boundless lecherous lifestyle and has fully abandoned every care for the state welfare. His evil example has devaluated the justice in the Great Empire of Safavid, where bestiality reigns today and the evil remains unpunished”. (Nat’roshvili, 1991:456)

Petr Butkov, the Russian historian, state figure and serviceman, characterizes Shah Sultan Husayn in this way: “Husayn, the Shah of Persia, took over the state power in 1694. Handsome appearance, generosity and, essentially, condemnation of behaviors of his father Sulayman, inspired positive attitudes of the court nobles towards him. In the early years of his ruling, he was demonstrating justice, honesty and humanism, but the time showed what we should expect from the Monarch, who grew up in the circle of women and who understands this life very little. He used to spend the whole day in the Harem and relied on his Ministers in everything. He was idler and haughty, while the country was managed by his Ministers, who disguised each other and, because of weakness of Husayn, they were strengthening their own power” (But’kov, 1869:1).

According to references by Mohammad Kazem, Shah Sulayman, the father of Shah Sultan Husayn, complains about idleness and laxity of his own son. Kazem writes that when Shah Sulayman was at the point of death, He summoned Viziers and representatives of his inner circle and instructed them to enthrone Abas instead of Husayn for sake of the country welfare.
However, nobles of the Sulayman’s Court, who were following their own private interests, backed Sultan Husayn to ascend to the throne, because they realized brave and severe Abbas Mirza (as characterized by Kazem) would not let them dissolve the state power. (Kazem, 1374:18)

It should be noted that impoverished peasantry had to abandon their living places, because tax burden on the population doubled and tripled in the second half of the XVII century.

The royal edict issued by Shah Sultan Husayn in 1710 restored the instruction of affixing peasants to the land. Rayats, who would abandon the residential places, would be sought for 12 years to return them back to the abandoned residential place. After expiration of this period, searching was to be ceased and the fled Rayats were registered in the tax registry due to the new residential place.

The agriculture sector slowdown resulted in reduction of inflows to the Shah treasury and revenues of distinct Nobles decreased. Naturally, Nobles were discontent with the Shah’s governance. The Shah preferred to increase revenues from external trades. To shrink the influence of the Dutch merchants (Dutch East-India Company subdued Iran’s monopoly on trade with European countries) He concluded two trade agreements with France (1708 and 1715) to give higher preferences and privileges to the French merchants as compared to Dutch ones. French traders were exempted from customs taxes and they used to enjoy special privileges from the Shah court.

Impoverishment of villages weakened the internal trade. Economic ties with distinct districts narrowed. Shah Sultan Husayn, who was under the influence of Shiite Clergy, was persecuting Sunnites that were a majority in Kurdistan, Afghanistan, eastern South Caucasus. He used to also persecute followers of Dervish-Sufism and radical Shiite Sects.

References by Esai Hasan Jalalians prove how population was enumerated for imposing new taxes on: Several persons were chosen in each village – head of the village, clergy and honorable persons and they were forced separately to testify about village residents, their economy and taxable facilities. These testimonies were compared to each other and suspects of providing inaccurate information were brutally punished. (kutsia,1971:20)

Having returned to his homeland Doure Efendi, who had been referred to Iran as an Ambassador by the Turkish Sultan in 1720, characterized the Safavid Iran State as a once magnificent and ordered country that was seeing its own decadency (Arunova and Ashrafyan,1958:54). At the same time, the Ambassador of Peter to Iran Artemi Volinski emphasized economic collapse in the Safavid Iran and accused dishonest rulers in this misery. (Arunova and Ashrafyan,1958:54)

At the beginning of the XVIII century, people revolts broke out at province districts of the Savafid Country. The rebellious regions were most demonstrating the disguise against the Safavid Dynasty. Kurds, Turkmans, Armenians, Georgians, who were suffering evident persecution from the Safavid Rulers, launched insurgency. Semi nomadic tribe of Afghan-Ghilzai also started rebel (the District of Kandahar). This rebel was very dangerous for the Safavid Country. The rebel was led by Mir Veis, the Kalantar of the city, head of the tribe of Ghilzai.

Historians have highlighted very important issues about reasons of the Safavid Dynasty decadency. In practice, their considerations match contemporary historians (chroniclers), of the last Safavids. They provide correct estimation of that period and at the same time, make very interesting accents.
The general picture around this issue in historiography is the following: economic factors, internal confrontation, heavy tax policy, corruption and flourishing Harem lifestyle, as well as alcohol addiction and immoral conduct by nobles, wasting treasury resources to satisfy immoral desires resulted in decadency of the Safavid dynasty. One reason was generating another vicious action.

“Shah Sultan Husayn, son of Sulayman, was not considered to be a new ruler after his father died in 1694, but eunuchs of the King’s Harem, the court nobles and Mariam Bugum, sister of his grandmother, who had brought him up, supported him to become a monarch (Mariam Buguni enjoyed huge power and influence in the Safavid Iran of that period), because they could freely act under the appeasable ruler rather than under an independent person”, (Matthee,2005:72). Not only vassal countries were seeing Iran’s decay, but the neighboring big countries – Osman Empire and Russia also did and they were supervising and spying about each other for hostile purposes, N. Berdzenishvili says. About Shah Sultan Husayn he writes: “Shah – incapable Sibarit was ruling in Isfahan and his court became a domain of irresponsible bribe-takers”. (Berdzenishvili,1973:301) As noted above, Shah Husayn succumbed to influence of Shiite Clergy. George Sanikidze writes the same and points out that Mohammad Baqir Majlisi used to control the activity of Shah Sultan Husayn. The latter became Sheikh Ol-Eslam of Isfahan in 1687, while in 1694 he received the title of Molabash, a head of the clergy. “It was Majlisi that handed over royal insignia to Sultan Husayn at the enthronization process. In response to the question about what he would receive for compensation, Majlisi requested a royal decree on prohibiting wine drinking and announcing sports games and tournaments illegal. Moreover, he requested expulsion of all Sufism followers from Isfahan. Prohibition of wine-drinking turned out very conditional, because the Shah turned out a lover of Bacchus himself. However, Majlisi achieved success in other directions (Sanikidze,2005:142).

A number of Russian historians also name Shah Sultan Husayn as an untalented and weak-minded person, a puppet of the Safavid court nobles (Arunova And Ashrafyan, 1958:53). However, they also assert that not only the incapability of the Shah has led the Safavid Dynasty to collapse. Intensification of internal conformation within the ruling class has also caused the dynasty destruction, as well as state economy frustration disordered the whole state system. (Pigulevskaya et al,1958:308 ) “Imposition of these illegal taxes, on the one hand, have inspired economic frustration, while, on the other hand, the new extreme upturn in feudal exploitation was deepening the rural sector dissolution and economic breakdown” (Katsit’adze,2009:403).

The internal feudal confrontation lasted throughout the 18th century and this fact led Iran to full destruction and annihilation, Zurab Sharashenidze noted. (Sharashenidze,1970:3).

John Foran highlights a decline in demand for Iranian silk as a result of increased demand of Bengal products. The corruption was also a major problem. The historian points out that after the major Vizier Mohammad Taqi, who was fighting corruption through spies and was assassinated because of this, no other Vizier has tried to defeat corruption by the same system and on the contrary, they were promoting corruption. As a result, the country received heavy taxation policy and financial problems could not be resolved. (Foran,1992:286)
Prioritizing the Harem life, growing its importance, expansion of factionalism and moral collapse of the royal court are considered as real reasons behind the Safavid decay. This period shows addiction of Shahs to alcoholism and Harem life. The evident proof to this is the influence of Maryam Begum, the sister of the grandmother of Shah Sultan, in the Safavid Country. (Axworthy, 2007:149)

By 1722, John Perry noted, the 220-year Safavid Empire, knees at the verge of dissolution. Perry, like all other western oriental researchers, appraises the ruling of Great Shah Abas, as the best period of the Safavid power, while he characterizes the ruling of Shah Sulayman and Shah Husayan as a dead period in Iran. These authors stresses that the Shah’s close circle had sunk into corruption, severity. He also exposes Shah Sulayman’s disequilibrium and Shah Husayn’s harmful policy. Both Monarchs were indifferent to state affairs.

Perry writes that the fragile structure of the Safavid was empowered by great achievements of its founders until Mir Mahmud of Afghan did not stifle it finally as a political body in just eight months. (Perry, 1971:59).

The ruling period of Shah Sultan Husayan was signaling that he would be the last Shah in of the Safavid Dynasty, Andre Newman said. (Newman, 2009:115) Eventually, the original sources expose the main reasons of the Safavid Dynasty decay quite accurately. Consequently, modern western research works show certain consensus over the issue. However, despite coinciding positions, various researchers, as we see it, emphasize this or that specific reasons and elements of breakdown and further decay of the Dynasty (social tension, external factors, weakness of the Safavid Monarchs and so on) and they make accent on specific issues when exploring the issue. Comparison of their research works gives a quite comprehensive and real picture of gradual destruction of the Safavid State.
References


