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The position of Shi'ite Civilization during the Safavid Era

The Safavid period (1502-1723 A.D. [907-1135 AH]) is considered the age of Iran's revival of culture, science, and trade. This is the dynasty that came into being from the Shafi'i Sufism of Ardebil Kānaqāh and seized political power with the support of Shi'ite tribes during the rule of Jonayd and Haydar. Its formal establishment by Shah Isma'il, however, was in 1502 A.D. [907 AH].

After a period of turbulence, it was the Safavid government that created a powerful, civilized and culture-friendly nation. Because of this national and political unity, the level of social welfare, economic growth and foreign relations improved significantly. After they created a relatively peaceful situation, Safavids started constructing different buildings or restoring monuments, through which they enhanced the position of the Iranian cultural and Islamic heritage. Introducing a new cultural and national identity provided means for the growth of the elites. In fact, historical sources emphasize that the reign of Shah Abbas I (1587-1628 A.D. [996-1038 AH]) had been a very important era in the development of science and art. Since 1591 [1000 AH], a series of activities by Shah Abbas helped develop Iranian Islamic culture and art. These activities were constructing cities and villages, improving commercial trade and economic prosperity, creating a strong administration, and defeating tribal tendencies. Moreover, the breakdown of tribal relations between Qizilbash and the new forces such as Armenians and Georgians, who converted to Islam like Allahverdi Khan and his son Imam-Quli Khan (Savory, 1366, 78-80) was influential too.

After the capital was moved to Isfahan, great designers such as Mir Damad, Sheikh Baha'i, Mir Fendereski, Mulla Sadra and Ali Akbar designed buildings based on Shi'ite beliefs. This improved scientific and artistic schools. Moreover, building more than seventy schools resulted in the development of science. In fact, different Isfahani schools appeared in fields such as literature, religion (e.g., interpretation, Hadith, discourse, Fiqh (religious jurisprudence), and mysticism), mathematics (e.g., geometry), astronomy, wisdom, and engineering. For instance, in mathematics, Sheikh Baha'i wrote *Kholasih Al-Hisab* (Summary of Mathematics) and *Bahr Al-Hisab* (the sea of mathematics), translated into French in 1843 and 1864 A.D. consecutively. As they tried to build massive constructions, the fields such as geometry and architecture developed and the rules of logarithm were discovered by Mulla Mohammad Bagher Yazdi (Seyed Hossein Nasr, *Science and Civilization in Islam*, p. 139). Additionally, Mir Fendereski, the philosopher and mystic, wrote *Al-Sana'ih* to help the Iranian craftsmanship. Lastly, building roads such as East-Center, Fars-Capital/Rey, and Mazandaran (Shah Abbasi) Roads as well as building more than a thousand caravansary led to the development of economic growth and commercial trade. Furthermore, Iranian industrial products from the textile and silk workshops in Kashan and Isfahan were exported to Europe.

The Safavid civilization (Alawi Civilization) was based on Shi'ite thoughts. The Safavid government had to establish a stable Shi'ite civilization against Eastern and Western enemies such as Uzbeks and Ottomans. Hence, scientists and engineers were asked to establish new principles for urban planning based on Shi'ite thoughts. The architects added a new urban context to the old Seljuk urban context towards the south of the city so that the old urban context is not damaged. This conscious scientific movement turned the old Isfahan into a twin town and a new square was built against the old one (Shafaghi, 1385, p.121).

Islamic urban planning was not restricted to Tabriz, Qazvin and Isfahan but it included other cities such as Mashhad, Kashan, Neyshabur, Sabzevar, Kerman, Najaf, Karbala, and Kadhimiya. All over Iran, mosques, schools, palaces, gardens, roads, streets, caravansaries, bathrooms, and holy shrines were built. The capital of the Safavid government, i.e., Isfahan, turned into an international city that was visited by many tourists, political agents, and Asian and European tradesmen. Many countries, e.g., India, China, Russia, Italy, England, France, Germany, Poland and Spain opened their commercial departments in Isfahan. Furthermore, scientists from all over the country moved to Isfahan to study religious, and scientific subjects, which resulted in the formation of Shi'ite scientific and educational centers. In addition to scientific subjects, artistic matters, e.g., architecture, calligraphy, painting, pottery, tile making, weaving carpets, metalworking and textiles grew significantly.

The Safavid architecture as a continuation of Timurid architecture grew because of civic growth and urbanism. Polychrome tiles were extensively used for decorating buildings and on numerous inscriptions, Shi'ite slogans were written in addition to Quranic verses. Safavid architecture included thousands of mosques, caravansaries, shrines, schools, bridges, palaces, and gardens. As an illustration, Naqsh-e Jahan Square is a symbol of architectural growth during the Safavid government.

Naqsh-e Jahan Square: Although there is disagreement about the year in which it is constructed, two reliable sources have mentioned very close dates: One source mentions that Naqsh-e Jahan of Dar Al-Saltaneh was constructed in 1603[○] A.D. [1011 AH] (Seyed Abdul-Hosseini Al-Hosseini Khatun Abadi, 1973, *Waqayih Al-Sinin wa Al-Awam*, p. 499). Another source states that the Square and Chahar Bazaar was constructed in 1602 A.D. [1010 A.H.] (Vali Gholi Shamlou, 1993, *Qisas Al-Khaqani*, p. 184). Naqsh-e Jahan (Alavi Square), 525m long and 168m wide, comprises square and rectangular shapes with a ratio of 1 to 3, which indicates why the Square is seen as larger than it is. Moreover, the existence of a building, i.e., Qeysarieh, Abbasi Great Mosque, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque, and Āli Qāpu Palace, on each side adds to the beauty of the scenery. The square is surrounded by two hundred two-story shops. Each shop faces the square and has a back door that opens towards the bazaar located around the square. From a symbolic point of view, the bazaar in the north of the square is a symbol of Life and the Abbasi Great Mosque in its South is a symbol of the Afterlife. The interconnection between Life and Afterlife is based on a Hadith by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):, “Al-Donya mazra’a Al-Akhirah” [Life is a farm for Afterlife]. On the eastern side of the square, Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque is the symbol of religious jurisprudence that interconnects Life to Afterlife. On the western side, however, there is Āli Qāpu Palace (Darb-e āli) from which the King and his agents established the peace and security of their society .

Āli Qāpu Palace: This palace was possibly ordered by Shah Abbas to be built upon a Timurid Palace in 1609 A.D. [1018 A.H.]. Five floors were added to the original palace, on top of which the beautiful scenery of Isfahan is seen. The name Āli Qāpu is derived from the phrase Ottomoton High Government. The palace is painted by Reza Abbasi, the famous miniaturist and painter (1635 A.D. [1044 A.H.]). He has also painted Qeysarieh and Chehel Sotoon Palaces. The third floor was where he stayed. In 1645 A.D. [1054 A.H.] Shah Abbas II added 18 pillars made of plane-tree wood to become a glorious palace like Chehel Sotoon .

Sheikh Lotfollah Mosque: The building of this mosque started in 1603 A.D. [1011 A.H.] and construction of its entrance ended in 1604 A.D. [1012 A.H.] while the decoration of its Mihrab was completed in 1619 A.D. [1028 A.H.]. At its entrance, there is an inscription, written on a cobalt blue tile by Alireza Abbasi, which says that the mosque is ordered to be built by Shah Abbas to encourage Prophet Muhammad’s religion. On top of its Mihrab, there is another inscription made of a beautiful and delicate mosaic tiling written by Bagher Bana, which says that Muhammad Reza bin Hossein Bana Isfahani designed this mosque in 1619 A.D. [1028 A.H.]. This mosque is named after an immigrant Faqih (religious figure) called Sheikh Lotfollah Jebel. The inscriptions inside the mosque were written by two great calligraphers, i.e., Alireza Abbasi and Bagher Bana. Some Quranic verses and a Hadith quoted from the prophet Muhammad about the virtue of going to the mosque are written on them. The dome-shaped ceiling of the mosque which surrounds the whole mosque fascinates people. Some poems which praise Imams, composed by Sheikh Baha’i, the great poet and scientist, have been written by Bagher Bana on the eight half-domes around the main dome.

Abbasi Great Mosque: The entrance of this mosque, located in the south of the square, started in 1611 A.D. [1020 A.H.] and ended in 1616 A.D. [1025 A.H.]. The mosque is 45 degrees toward Mecca. On the inscription installed on its entrance is written: “Torab Al-atabah al-moqadasa al-nabawiah wa qamamah al-sahata al-motahata al-alawiah” and on another inscription, a hadith is written: “Ana Madinah al-elm wa Ali Baboha,” which indicates the role of prophet Muhammad and Imam Ali in Safavid Civilization. This mosque has four porches, two minarets on both sides of the entrance and two minarets on the sides of the dome. The height of the external side of the southern dome is 54m and its internal height is 38m while 16 meters of which is empty. This has created a foundation that reflects the sound all over the mosque. The main dome is built upon eight half-domes which symbolize eight doors of paradise. Eight windows reflect light to mirrors of the half-domes to create illumination which symbolizes the light of guidance towards God .

Calligraphy in the Safavid era: In this era, Calligraphy found its place in buildings, works of art, and books in cities such as Tabriz, Mashhad, Isfahan, etc. It is stated that the Sufist and mystic types of Shi’ite beliefs flourished after the Mongolian Conquest. During the Timurid dynasty, calligraphy found its place in the Iranian Shi’ite art, indicating how Safavid beliefs in Shi’ism motivated the creation of great calligraphic works. Further to Shi’ite beliefs, they tried to revitalize Iranian ancient customs and rituals in the presence of artists and scientists. Starting during the Ilkhanate dynasty till the Timurid era, artistic works, e.g. Architecture and calligraphy were supported by the Safavid dynasty, which resulted in the creation of classic artworks .

It is stated that the golden era of Islamic civilization had been in the tenth and eleventh centuries [fourth and fifth Hijri centuries]. However, the documents show that this process continued until the seventeenth century [eleventh Hijri century]. Their civilization had been shoulder to shoulder with the West .

The Iranian culture and civilization during the Safavid era with the support of the king developed

science and art both scientifically and religiously .

The Shi'ite civilization flourished during the Safavid era because of the efforts made by scientists, elites and artists. The urban plans were performed in the capital and many other cities in Iran. The Iranian urban planning was copied in the Indian subcontinent such as Dakn, Delhi, Lahore and the Taj Mahal, which the Taj Mahal is one of the seven wonders of the world .

During the Safavid era, different sciences, Shi'ite knowledge and arts, e.g. calligraphy, architecture and painting grew because of developments in civilization and urban planning. Most of these movements turned into schools .

Studies on the Safavid era are mostly done outside Iran. Iran, during the Safavid dynasty, was one of the most important centers around the world as they had important developments in their relations with Europe. The number of books and articles written about this era is an indication of this significance. Since the publishing industry was developing in Europe, most of the books written about the Safavid era were published there for their readers. It should be noted that cultural, and Shi'ite studies on the Safavid era are accepted to be published in the Journal of Safavid Studies. This Journal attempts to interconnect the Iranian scientific centers to the world. Therefore, all researchers are invited to send their papers in the English language to the Journal to be published after the blind review.

Chief Editor of the Journal of Safavid Studies
Asghar Montazer Al-Gha' em

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