MISCELLANEA

RAHDARS AND THEIR TOLLS IN SAFAVID AND AFSHARID IRAN*

With the establishment of the Safavid state in 1501 security on the roads in Iran was gradually reestablished. In 1510 or thereabouts a Venetian merchant observed "this country is perfectly free from robbers". Although this observation held for the area between Diarbekr and Van it soon also became true for other parts of Iran. Towards the end of the reign of Shah Isma'il II (d. 1576) security on the roads was such that the Shāh could leave Qandahār, Herat, and Mashad without a governor (hākīm). Under Shāh Isma'il's successor, Shāh Muḥammad Khudābanda (1578-88) roads became insecure again due to internal strife. His son, Shāh 'Abbas I, soon restored law, order, and security on the roads. According to Iskandar Beg Shāh 'Abbas I created a new policy by making the governors responsible for any untoward occurrence on the roads in their jurisdiction. However, such a policy in principle also existed under the Ilkhanids, Jalayarids, and Timurids. The governor (hākīm) and royal intendants (oazīr) were charged with maintenance of security on the roads. The actual execution of this task was in the hands of the roadguards or rāhdārs.

As travellers moved along the roads in Safavid and Afsharid Iran they constantly encountered these rāhdārs, who were responsible for the safety of travellers and their belongings and who exacted tolls from them. Tavernier and Du Mans claim that rāhdārs existed throughout the Empire, particularly in places where the taking of a particular route was unavoidable, such as at river crossings; Olearius that tolls were paid in the main towns and at many bridges and passes. Thévenot states that they were to be found at the frontiers both of the state and of each province ("Khanlik"). How far do the actual experiences of the travellers bear these statements out?

Thévenot met rāhdārs as soon as he entered Iran from Mandalī. On the route from the north-west to Isfahan, Tavernier or Chardin or both mention rāhdārs (or the payment of dues) at Nakhchivān, Marand, Miyāna, Sarcham and a little beyond Zanjan; Kotov at the Kur river. Careri mentions rāhdārs at Sadarak, Nakhchivān, Marand, Scatchit (?), Tabrīz, Miyāna, Sulṭāniya, and Qum. Thévenot mentions rāhdārs or payments four times between his initial encounter and Isfahan; between Asadābād and Hamadān and at Nishār, Sārūq, and Bag (?); Hedges found some at Chāhā Sīyāh. Between Isfahan and Shirāz there are two sets mentioned, one outside Isfahan and one outside Shirāz; between Shirāz and Bandar 'Abbās six, at Muhkak, Chāhtalkh, Dihra', Biriz, Lār, and Bandar 'Abbās. On his journey between Shirāz and Bandar-i Rig, Thévenot found a multitude of guards, two sets on the first stage of his journey, and one each on the second, third, and fourth pass. Normally they were housed in what Chardin describes as a bureau and Thévenot a maison or maisonette. Occasionally they were to be found inside or in charge of a caravansarai (like the nine or ten at Chāhtalkh). They were also found on bridges, at river-crossings, and one set on top of a pass.

In some cases it is clear from what the travellers themselves say that rāhdārs were to be found at or near provincial boundaries. Such were Miyāna, where Chardin
gives the Qizil Uzun as the frontier between Ādharbayjan and Ḥirāq-i Ājam, outside Isfahān, at and at a short distance before Bandar-Abbās. The ṭāḥdārs at Chahātalkh and Muḥkak might have been on the borders of the independent administration of Jahrum. In other cases they are clearly assigned to a specific jurisdiction, such as those payable to the Māṣṭre de piage at Nakhchivān, to the Khān of Sultāniyya outside Zanjān, and for Shirāz and Lār at their respective bālgāhs. Yet other cases cannot be confidently put into this category, such as those payable at Marand, Asadābād, Nīshār, Bag (?), and Chālā Siyāh. It seems impossible that the number of ṭāḥdārs between Shirāz and Bandar-i Rig could have corresponded to administrative jurisdictions. It therefore seems likely that these various ṭāḥdār stations were subordinate units like the one at Sarcham, which might have belonged to the Zanjān administration. It therefore appears that the various ṭāḥdār stations were under specific administrative jurisdictions. Kāempfer states that a certain stretch of a route was farmed out by a governor. Information from the 18th century confirms such a practice. According to the data in the files of the Dutch East Indies Company the right to collect ṭāḥdār on the route Isfahān-Mahyār and Outzum (?) was farmed by two tax-collectors known as ṭāḥdārbāshī, viz. Muḥammad ‘Alī Beg, brother of the mālik ut-tujjār of Isfahān, and Ṣafī Quli Beg. In the jurisdiction of the vazir of Yazd we encounter the same organization, viz. a ṭāḥdār bāshī, Ṣādūl Mālik, who was in charge of various ṭāḥdār stations. Finally the fact that the governors were responsible for the security on the roads makes it quite unlikely that the administrative organization charged with the execution of this task did not correspond with that of the responsible officers.

The effectiveness with which the system operated can be illustrated first by the reaction of travellers when they entered the Safavid dominions. Whereas Olearīus was impressed by the contrast between Russian coarseness and boorishness and Iranian courtesy and refinement, and Fryer by the contrast in appearance and behaviour of the Indians and the Iranians, to the other travellers who had arrived from the Ottoman Empire it was the feeling of safety which was uppermost. In Kazirūn, De Beryte felt able to breathe easily not only because he had left the garm-sīr but also by being exemptes des continuelles craintes, des avanies et des voleurs auquel on est expose dans l'Estat du Turc. Tavernier noted the difference between Turkey and Iran in the opening of his Voyages. His caravan set up tents with free hearts on crossing into Iran in 1644. Beyond Irīvān, he stresses the fact that it was perfectly safe to leave the caravan or not to travel in a caravan at all. Thévenot’s caravan ceased to set a nightly guard once they were in Iran.

Ṭāḥdārs were instructed to stop anyone travelling alone, by an unusual route, or who was completely unknown to them in case he might be wanted for robbery. The third factor was the cause of Thévenot’s being stopped at Mandali, and the two ṭāḥdārs who stopped him were armed. After he had established his credentials he was allowed to go, and they informed him that they would have lost their job if he had been allowed to pass unchallenged. Chardin was soon found by ṭāḥdārs after he had lost his way between Lār and Bandar-Abbās, and was given an escort to the ṭāḥdārs of the place he was going to. A man who had robbed from Tavernier’s caravan in Tabrīz was apprehended for the first two reasons. Other examples of the effectiveness of ṭāḥdārs are given by Fryer; a thief who had stolen an Indian merchant’s ass load of cloth apprehended at Muḥkak, and the speedy