

Routes and Tracks from Central Asia to Kashmir

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The vast mountain systems of the Pamirs, the Hindukush, the Karakoram, and the Kuen-Lun, form a seemingly impenetrable barrier between Central Asia and the sub-continent of India. Yet from time immemorial, armies and people have moved across from the Central Asian hinterlands to India and to the West. In historical times, Alexander the Great, the Scythians and Yueh-Chih, and later the Huns and the Mongols have traversed these conglomerates of glaciers, peaks and mountain country along tracks and routes used by the sparse populations of these regions, bounded on the west by the Iranian plateau and on the east by China. Descending from the Pamirs the arc of the Hindukush has offered the easier passage, and the branch of the Silk Route by which Indian merchants transhipped silks from China to take them to the ports on the Indian western coast, went across Balkh or Wakhan to India¹.

We are concerned in this article, however, with the routes across the Karakoram and the Kuen Lun leading into Kashmir.

Beginning at the eastern end, we may take note of the Keriya route from Khotan to Western Tibet. This route was used by the Chinese traveller Fa-Hien in the 5th Century AD. The famous explorer Aurel Stein was keen to use this route for his journey from Khotan to Aksai Chin in 1908. He knew that Kishan Singh of the Survey of India used it in the '70s of the 19th Century for his return to India after being with the Forsyth mission to Yakub Beg, the then ruler of Yarkand. A number of English explorers followed up Kishan Singh's feat and Carey confirms the accuracy of Kishan Singh's record of the journey. But thereafter the Chinese authority stepped in to keep the route closed, and it was not till 1950 that China is supposed to have used it to send their force from Sinkiang to supplement the main forces which occupied Tibet, marching from Chinese mainland in the east.

Kishan Singh had reported that he had returned "via Polu, Noh, and the Pangong Lake. It (the route) ran from 1½ to 2 degrees to the east of the most easternly route, namely, that which W.H. Johnson discovered on his journey to Khotan². In 1956 Lionel Davidson was the first western journalist to visit Yarkand where he was told that the Chinese were going to develop

the Keriya route to Western Tibet³. Why the Chinese developed the alternative route via Aksai Chin and whether the Keriya route has again been used or closed is not clear.

The route via Aksai Chin which also passes through Khotan is supposed to have been used by the Northern Zungar Mongols in the early 18th century when they invaded Tibet to oust the Mongols of the South who were holding the Dalai Lama in custody in Lhasa. The Zungar Mongols used the route in winter and in the present day, the Chinese forces claim to have used it in winter for the advance of their supplementary force into Western Tibet in 1950. We know that the Khan of Khotan had helped to re-discover this route in 1866 when Yakub Beg held the Karakoram Pass, and the Khan of Khotan wanted to reach the British in India for help to retain his independence. His emissary could not use the Karakoram Pass and found his way to Kashmir crossing the Kuen Lun by the Yangi Dawann Pass, and then via Aksai Chin. The cairns and huts along this route constructed by the emissary Habibullah, were found in position by Johnson who used this route for his journey to Khotan soon after, and also by Sir Qurel Stein in 1908 in his unsuccessful attempt to reach Aksai Chin from Khotan via the Keriya route.

The English were keen to find an alternative to the Leh route via the Karakoram Pass, as they wished to develop a route from Kanga, Bushahr and other territories under their direct rule in preference to the route via Kashmir dominion. In 1870 they had entered into a treaty with the Maharaja to explore such a route. But they already had some information about the route. In 1857, Adolf, one of the three Schlagintweit brothers engaged by the East Indian Company to explore the trans-Himalayan region, had crossed Lingzi-tang and Aksai Chin plateaux. He was on his way to Kashgar, where he was murdered on August 26, 1857. Thereafter, Shaw, the uncle of Francis Younghusband and a tea planter in Kangra, as well as Hayward, had also used the route on their way to Sinkiang. Some English merchants, like Thomas Russel, used this route to transport their goods to Eastern Turkistan. But after the death of Yakub Beg in 1869, the Chinese did not encourage these aspirations and the Russians were more successful in obtaining concessions for the import of their goods and merchandise into Sinkiang.

At the same time, the British found that the Karakoram Pass route was after all a more reliable way to use for their purpose. The quest for an alternative route avoiding Leh, Ladakh, and Kashmir altogether, and the imports and petty harassment of the frontier posts of the Kashmir Darbar, was not found feasible. And yet the Chinese have not found this to be so. Not having found it possible to rely on the route via Keriya, they determined to

use the route via Aksai Chin to get to Tibet from Sinkiang, even though it involved advancing into an area where there had been no Chinese or Tibetan presence hitherto.

The above mentioned routes lead across the Kuen-Lun mountains west of them, the Karakoram mountains furnish the main access to Kashmir from the north. The Karakoram region extends upto the Ishkoman and Karumbar rivers on the west, beginning in the east with the upper Shyok river. This is a region of towering mountain peaks and vast glacial deposits second only to those in the Polar regions. There are nineteen mountain peaks higher than 25,000 feet. In the Eastern Karakorams, the main glaciers are the Rimo, north-west of the Karakoram Pass, and the Shyok river going south to join the Indus. The Siachen glacier is the largest in the region and is 75km long. From its "Sprout" rises the Nubra river which joins the Shyok. The Siachen glacier reaches right upto the peaks of K₂, the Gashebrum and the Apsarasas.

The most important route across is the Karakoram Pass, which is at a height of 18,500 feet. This was the main caravan route between Yarkand and Leh. On the Ladakh side, the caravans passed through the Depsang plains into the valley of the Nubra river to Panamik and thence to Leh. On the northern side of the Karakoram the Chinese had their posts at the foothills of the Kuen Lun mountains, at Sanju, Kilian and Kuguja. Under the British instigation, the Chinese advanced their customs port to Suget Karoul, on the northern descent from the Karakoram Pass. The Kashmir Darbar had their outpost at Shahidulla on the northern side of the Pass, but the British dissuaded the Maharaja from maintaining it.

Mirza Haidar, a cousin of Babur, invaded Kashmir by the Karakoram Pass from Turkestan in the 16th century. The British had learnt of this route from Vigne, a traveller in the Punjab & Kashmir in 1839 who had mapped their centuries-old caravan route and it was just crossed by Thomson. Although used regularly by the merchant caravans, the British were inclined to find a substitute for it, and tried to explore many routes across Aksai Chin. They gave up this quest ultimately, and the latter routes remain dead till the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s. In the meanwhile, the route via Karakoram remained the main route for caravans till 1950. Then the Chinese discontinued it.

North of the Karakorams and running parallel to them is the Aghil range which was discovered by Francis Younghusband in his journey from Peking to India in 1887, through the Gobi Desert to Kashgar. Instead of the

well known Karakoram Pass route, Younghusband was advised by his senior, Bell, to try to cross the Karakoram by a new route, the so-called Muztagh route. The Muztagh Pass lay on the direct route from Yarkand to Kashmir. "Was it practicable? This is what I had to discover", wrote Younghusband in "The heart of a Continent". Wali, his trusted guide warned him that raiders from Hunza infested the route, on their way to the villages of Turk-estan. But Younghusband left marching down the Yarkand on September 18 determined to try this route. In the first week or more they passed through the inhabited, outlying ranges and crossed comparatively low passes. Then they approached the higher trackless mountains. They came to a side valley with a smaller river called the Surakwat. Some way up at about 15,000 feet, they came in sight of the last pass, the Aghil, before they ascended the Muztagh Pass itself. "The very existence of the Aghil Pass had not been known We descended into the valley of the Shaksgam river a new discovery..... followed it down for a day and then descended a side valley at the back of which Wali said was the Muztagh Pass". When Younghusband saw the peaks of the Karakoram he says "he was thrilled with delight viewed from that stand point they made a far more imposing array than the Everest group". After crossing the Shaksgam (called the Oprang) river, the party ascended the Sarpo Lago river valley. In Younghusband's words "we descended into the valley of the shaksgam river, followed it down for a day and then descended a side valley on my left". The pass was closed by a glacier, and although a new pass was in use for sometime instead of the closed old one, Younghusband decided to try the old one. "I had to join the mess on the sheer perpendicular face of the glacier, but they reached the top. "The other side was grand enough in all conscience", he wrote, "just a sea of Matter-horns on a huge scale we were on a fairly level ice-field Next day we followed the glacier down to its junction with the Boltoro (glacier).....For two more days we plodded..... at last we reached Askol".

Younghusband's achievement was that he was able to fix the main features of this region, discovered the Aghil range, the Shaksgam(Oprang), river, and the Boltoro glacier route to Askol in Baltistan. All this was done without any modern aids or training in climbing. What we have to realize is that the Chinese are now surveying this area which was surrendered to them by Pakistan after the border agreement of 1963. With Pakistan, they can develop the Skardu route from Baltistan to the Yarkand river.

Younghusband passed to the west of the Siachen glacier. The Baltis use not only the Skardu route to the north but also an old route from Khapalu to Kufelong along the Yarkand river. The route goes across the Siachen

glacier which it enters via the SiaLa and leaves on the north by Turkestan La. Khapalu is the base for all explorations by the British to the north and east Baltistan, but there has been no survey by them of this old track. The Baltis say that this track was used for going to Yarkand as well as to Khotan.

The Siachen glacier had remained undiscovered "because of difficulties of penetrating the upper Nubra in summer and the narrow gorge of the lower Siachen glacier"⁴. In June 1909 Longstaff had set out from Khapalu to search for the Soltoro Pass. He reached it at the head of the Bilafond glacier. He could see from here the group of peaks to the north of the Siachen and gave them the local name of Feram Kangri. Next he approached the Siachen glacier from the Panamik route to the Karakoram Pass. Later the Workmans, (husband and wife) visited and surveyed the Siachen glacier in 1911- 1912.

We get an inkling of the route across the Siachen from Wood who in 1914 accompanied the de Fillippi expedition to the Rimo glacier, on behalf of the Survey of India. He explored the tributories of the Yarkand river on the upper Shaksgam watershed. In one of the valleys, his men found a dead body presumably of a merchant. In a detailed note annexed to his report Wood gave all previous references to a track across the Siachen. Later when K Mason of the Survey of India surveyed the Shaksgam Valley, he also discovered a dead body in another tributary valley to the Yarkand river. He concluded that the man was a Baltis who had strayed from the track.

The Western Karakorams are in occupation of Pakistan which ousted the Jammu & Kashmir troops from Gilgit in 1947 and also took over Baltistan. The routes from Chinese Turkestan or Sinkiang to Hunza and to Chitral are among the most important. The one used by the British frequently for journeys to Central Asia is the western-most over the comparatively low Mintaka Pass to Tashkurgan in the Sankol region of Sinkiang adjoining the Russian Pamirs. The main axis of the Karakorams west of the Karakoram Pass is also called the Muztagh range. The mighty peaks north of the Himalayas dominate the glaciers and valleys on the route from Rawalpindi. Here is a description by Wilfred Noyce⁵, "As one flies from Rawalpindi northward up the Indus Valley to Gilgit, one is struck by the ugly great mass of the Nanga Parbat (of the Himalaya) 26,620 feet, towering up on the right, Haramosh (24,270 feet) rears icy walls, stands splendidly alone in the Gilgit Agency. Further north still, the great jumble of peaks culminate in Rakaposhi (25,550 feet) which dominates Gilgit". Gilgit is a central point for routes from the north-west. It commands the route via Dorah Pass through Chitral, as well as the route via Darkot Pass through Yasin. It also commands the Hunza valley to the east, with Irshad Wakhjar, Kilik and Mintaka Passes.

This rugged country of peaks and glaciers is inhabited by Dards, Baltis, and Kirgiz who survive by their sparse agriculture and their flocks. Agriculture is possible from glacial waters, and the flocks are grazed in narrow, high pastures. The main glaciers in the Western Karakoram are the Balura and the Hispar combining with the Biafo; and the Baltoro which furnishes a route to the Siachen. The rivers in the region are the Hunza and its tributaries. These furnish the routes for descending from the Jaghdumbash Pamir and the Sarikol region. The two main passes along these river routes are the Khunjerab and the Shamshal Passes.

East of the Hunza basin, the Shigon collects the waters of the Biafo, Panmak and Baltoro glaciers. The Masherbrum range (directly north-west of the Baltoro range) forms the southern barrier of the Baltoro glacier. No detailed survey has been made of the glaciers which feed the south-ward flowing torrents, the Hushe and the Kondus. These join and pour into the right bank of the Shyok a few miles above Khapalu.

The Mintaka pass is "the extremest boundary of 'China'"⁶ Meaning "A thousand ibex", it is 15,600 feet high and formed the main route from Tashkurgham to Hunza, used by travellers through the ages. However, the China-Pakistan "Friendship Highway" opened on 16 May 1983 is via the Khunjerab Pass. This highway is fit for heavy vehicle traffic, although the deep gorges and the friable nature of the mountain formations, renders it difficult to maintain the highway. It is stated that another road connecting the "Friendship Highway" with the road to Tibet via Aksai Chin has been built through Sinkiang.

Next we come to the Hindukush mountains which stretch in a south-westerly direction from the Knot of the Great Pamirs, through Afghanistan. Starting from Wakhan, a wedge of territory thrust between the Russian Pamirs and the Indian Sub-continent, the Hindukush slide down horizontally towards Herat, losing height as they move west-ward. The most feasible routes from Russia to the Indian sub-continent were considered to be those across the Hindukush into Balkh and the route via Wakhan. Hieun Tsang the Chinese pilgrim travelled to India in the 7th century AD. He passed through Balkh and Wakhan on his return journey. In the 13th century Marco Polo travelled to China via Wakhan. As regards Balkh, the Dorah Pass lies on the route from India. It led through the fertile Kokcha Valley in Balkh. To the east of the Dorah Pass is the Baroghil Pass which is approached from Chitral or Gilgit. Apprehending Russian advance, the British safeguarded themselves in the 19th century by contacts with the local rulers. They opened agencies in

Kafistan (part of Afghanistan), Gilgit, Chitral and Hunza from time to time, and gave subsidies to the rulers. They also strengthened their position by agreements with Maharaja of Kashmir in respect of these regions. In 1876, the Viceroy Lord Lytton signed an agreement with the Maharaja at Madhopur regarding Gilgit and obtained his agreement to the posting of Biddulph at Gilgit, and the Maharaja was to extend his rule into Yasin.

The valley of the Gilgit river which joins the Indus where the latter takes the great southward bend down to the Punjab, affords the most likely route for invasion. From the Baroghil pass, the route lies south via Yasin and Darkot to Chitral and Gilgit. The more westerly Dorab pass leads through Balkh to Kafiristan. These routes have in the past been used for such invasion. Alexander the Great crossed the Hindukush to invade Sigdrana (Somarkand). After staying there a couple of years, he re-crossed the Hindukush into India. In AD 747, a Chinese force used the Darkot Pass with 30,000 men. They went directly across the glacial Darkot Pass into the Valley of Yasin. They destroyed the bridge over the Gilgit river near Gupis to stop the Tibetans from sending help to their components in the Oxus⁷.

The British sent several exploratory missions across the Hindukush into the Pamirs. Colonel Gordon and Colonel Lockhart led the two most important survey parties in the 1870s. They reported that Dorah and Baroghil passes were possible points for entry of the Russians from the Pamirs. Ultimately, the British and Russians demarcated the Afghan border south of the Pamirs in 1895 in such a way that the area of Wakhan served as a buffer between Russia and the State of Jammu and Kashmir. This peace lasted till 1979 when Russia occupied Wakhan as part of its invasion of Afghanistan.

REFERENCES

¹(See Aurel Stein "On Ancient Tracks Past the Pamirs" in *Himalayan Journal*, April 1932. But Schalter in "Stones of Silence", Andre Deutsch, 1980 states p.82 that the route used the Mintaka Pass).

²"Himalayan Frontiers", Dorothy Woodman (1966)

³"Turkestan Alive!" Lionel Davidson - Jonathan Cape (1956)

⁴K.Mason, "Abode" of Snow DUP, p 137

⁵Wilfred Noyce, "The Survived," 1962

⁶P.Fleming, "News from Tartary"

⁷Schalter, "Stones of Silence," Andre Deutsch, 1980 p.68