

- Steinmann, B. 1987. Le culte des dieux du clan chez les Tamang: la terre, le livre et la lignée, *L'Ethnographie* LXXXIII, 100-101 (Numéro Spécial: Rituels Himalayens).
- Toffin, G. 1987. Dieux du sol et démons dans les régions himalayennes, *Etudes rurales* 107/108.
- Toffin, G. 1990. Ancêtres claniques et esprits féminins dans l'Himalaya népalais, *Revue de l'Histoire des religions* CCVII(2).
- Tucci, G. 1973. "Les religions du Tibet", in G. Tucci & W. Heissig, *Les religions du Tibet et de la Mongolie* (Paris, Payot).
- Vohra, R. 1988. "Ethno-Historicity of the Dards in Ladakh-Baltistan: Observations and Analysis", in H. Uebach & J.L. Panglung (ed.), *Tibetan Studies* (München, Kommission für zentralasiatische studien).
- Vohra, R. 1989. *The religion of the Dards in Ladakh - Investigations into their pre-Buddhist 'Brog-pa Traditions* (Ettelbruck, Skydie Brown International).

LEH TO YARKAND Travelling the Trans-Karakoram Trade Route

Janet Rizvi
New Delhi

Nearly half a century after the Karakoram border between Ladakh and Sinkiang (Chinese Central Asia) was sealed, memories of 'the Yarkand trade' are still lively in Leh, together with a perception that it was an important element in the life and economy of pre-modern Ladakh. Personally, I believe that the trans-Karakoram trade (as it may be more accurately termed) was less fundamental to Ladakh's economy than the trades in pashm, dried apricots and various subsistence commodities like wool, barley, salt, butter and livestock, which bound the different regions of Ladakh and neighbouring countries together in a complex pattern of sale, purchase and barter that spread the surpluses of particular areas and made up the deficits of others. The trans-Karakoram trade, on the other hand, involved commodities that were neither produced in Ladakh nor - for the most part - consumed there; Ladakh was at best a staging-post between the Punjab and Sinkiang, and Leh an entrepot for the exchange of goods produced and consumed hundreds of miles away.¹

Nevertheless, the trans-Karakoram trade did make a difference to Ladakh in several ways. Firstly, it attracted to Leh merchants from Kashmir, Central Asia and Kashmir, giving the little town a prosperous and cosmopolitan atmosphere and adding variety to the racial composition of its population. Second, the demand for transport and services that it generated, especially in the Dras-Kargil belt, Leh and its hinterland, and Nubra, contributed significantly to the economy of these areas.

In the first half of this century, the transport of goods between Srinagar and Leh was almost a monopoly of kiraiyakash - pony

1. Rizvi, 1994. The author is currently working on a book surveying all the various trades of Ladakh. This will have detailed accounts of some of the local trades in subsistence and other commodities, including pashm.

transporters - from Dras and the villages down to Kargil and even as far as Mulbekh; while the trans-Karakoram caravans seem to have been staffed partly by men from Yarkand and Karghalik, and partly by Ladakhis - of whom a fair proportion were Arghons from Leh (members of the mixed community arising from the marriages between Kashmiri or central Asian merchants and local women: Sunni Muslims to a man), while many others came from the villages of Nubra.

Thus the trans-Karakoram journey was a major experience in the lives of a significant number of Ladakhis, merchants and pony-men alike; that is why it seems worthwhile to enquire into what it actually involved. The traders and pilgrims who followed the route over the centuries left no written record of it; but between 1848 and 1947, a number of western travellers had occasion to travel along the whole or parts of it, and many of them published their accounts of the journey. It is on these accounts that the present paper is based. Why Leh-Yarkand?

The first thing to notice about the Leh-Yarkand route is that it was not so much a single route as a complex of routes, converging on the bottleneck of the Karakoram Pass. The traveller's choice of which one to take depended on the season. Some merchants are said to have actually preferred to carry their goods in the bitter cold of winter when the rivers ran low, if they were not altogether frozen, and their valleys offered a track easier than the glaciated passes that were unavoidable in summer.

This indeed was one of the factors that made the Leh-Yarkand route preferable to any other between the Punjab and Sinkiang. Appalling though the passage by the Karakoram Pass was, whichever line you took, all the apparent alternatives were worse. To the east, various lines of march via the Changchenmo Valley and the Aksai Chin were actually tried for a few years during the 1870s, but the only advantage of these was the easier going underfoot, and this was offset by the longer distance through barren and uninhabited terrain, the greater average altitude, and the fact that the area was under so much snow as to make the route impassable for most of the year.² In a few 19th-century texts there are tantalising references to a 'royal road' said to have been in use in Mughal times, between Najibabad at

the foot of the Himalaya in western UP, and Khotan, an important centre east of Yarkand.³ But this seems to have fallen into disuse by the middle of the 17th century; and by the time 19th century travellers and writers were enquiring into the matter, the Tibetans had turned almost paranoid about allowing outsiders to enter their territory, except those whose trade or pilgrimage was sanctioned by ancient and uninterrupted usage.⁴

West of Ladakh, the Baltistan route via the Mustagh Pass, was indeed in use in the 17th century, but that was only because the route between Srinagar and Leh was closed for political reasons.⁵ The Mustagh Pass route involved days on end marching over glaciers, far from villages where yak might have been procurable as a supplementary form of transport; in any case the notoriously unpredictable advance and retreat of the central Karakoram glaciers often rendered it totally impassable. Further west, the passes into Hunza were relatively easy; but the gorge that linked Hunza to Gilgit and the valley of the Indus was so narrow and precipitous that - except possibly for a month or two in winter when the river ran low - it was impracticable for laden animals until the British blasted a road along it in the wake of their campaign of conquest in 1891. Caravans taking the Hunza route were at risk from bandits in the employ of the local ruler, a further disincentive. West again, Chitral offered a relatively easy trail, crossing the watershed between the sub-continent and central Asia by the Baroghil Pass, and proceeding by way of Wakhan and the Little Pamir to Tashkurgan, thence down to Kashgar on the edge of the Sinkiang desert. But Chitral was loosely administered and lawless, and had the reputation of being the centre of a traffic in slaves, often scooped up along with other loot from raided caravans.⁶ This was no doubt why the traders preferred to bank on the relatively settled political conditions of Ladakh, which were conducive to the development over centuries of an infrastructure of transport and services. This is turn added to its relative advantages over the alternatives.

3. Rizvi, 1994: 30-32.

4. See, e.g., Moorcroft MSS, D261: 28, 29-30; Deasy, 1901: 4, 46-47, 57, 60.

5. Bernier: 425-27.

6. For a more detailed survey of the possible routes across the Karakoram, whether suitable for caravans or not, see Rizvi, 1995.

The Routes

Whichever season you travelled, it was march of anything between 451 and 515 miles (726 and 829 kms), and took about a month not counting any halts on the way. Winter or summer, you had to get across the ranges, and that meant a minimum of four major passes, only one of them under 15,500 feet (4,700 m.). In summer, there was no way of side-stepping any of them as the river valleys were impassable, their waters, turbulent with snowmelt, rampaging down narrow gorges. You had to attack the ranges head-on, and the number of passes went up to six. The Ladakh Range just behind Leh was crossed by the Khardung-la; and the Thulanbuti-la (known to the Central Asian merchants as the Karawal Dawan or Frontier Pass) carried the road over the eastern rampart of the Nubra Valley and into the mountains of the Saser Spur between the valleys of the Nubra and the upper Shayok. One of the most difficult parts of the route was the Saser-la, over the Saser Spur; equally daunting, though for different reasons, was the windswept and bitterly cold Depsang Plain, three days march further on, at 17,500 feet (5,335 m.) probably the highest plateau in the world. The main watershed was crossed by the Karakoram Pass, at 18,300 feet (5,578 m.), the highest point on the route, but presenting no particular problems; also relatively easy was the Suget Dawan over the northernmost arm of the Kun-Lun range. A subsidiary range of the Kun-Lun was crossed by either the Kilian Dawan or the Sanju Dawan. The Kilian was easier and more direct, but higher; when it was closed, travellers were obliged to take the Sanju, which was rough and steep with an ice-field at the top. Even that might not complete the score. Occasionally, there was too much water in the Sanju River to permit a march straight down the valley; then it became necessary to make a detour over the 12,500-foot (3,810 m.) Chuchu Pass.⁷

In winter, when all the passes except the Karakoram itself were snowbound, the water-level in the rivers fell, and their beds could constitute an alternative route. Still the ranges had to be crossed; but the Ladakh Range had two passes within reach of Leh that stayed open longer than the Khardung-la, the Digar-la and the Chang-la. The Chang-la, indeed, could be negotiated for much of the winter, except during actual snowfall, and latterly became the accepted

winter route. This then took the trough of the upper Shayok, a four-day march which involved repeated crossings of the river - a total of 30, according to one account⁸ - up to the camping-ground of Kataklik. From here, it was sometimes possible to carry on up the Shayok, crossing the summer route at Saser Brangsa, the camping-ground immediately east of the Saser-la, to Gyapshan where the river's main affluent emerged from the Rimo Glacier. Travellers could then proceed up the valley of the Chip-chap, longest of the Shayok's headwaters, joining the summer route at Daulat Beg Oldi one day's march short of the Karakoram Pass. But for long periods, the track between Saser Brangsa and Gyapshan was blocked by the advance of glaciers from the west which filled the valley completely. On several occasions, the glaciers formed a dam behind which the waters of the Shayok and the Chip-chap collected in an immense lake. The breaking of this ice-dam caused devastating flash-floods down the Shayok, one such episode occurring in 1835, and others again in 1926 and 1929, when the lake was estimated to be 10-12 miles in length and 400 feet deep at the dam. Since the early 1930s, all the three glaciers involved - Chong Kumdan, Kichik Kumdan and Aktash - seem to be in retreat; latest reports and photographs show all of them well clear of the cliffs that tower above the river's eastern bank.⁹

When the Shayok above Saser Brangsa was impassable, winter caravans had to leave the river at Kataklik by a difficult track up a tributary stream, to reach Murgo, three stages short of the Karakoram Pass on the summer route which they followed as far as Malikshah two day's march beyond the Pass. From Malikshah they carried on down a tributary of the Yarkand river to its confluence with the main stream at Kapalung. After another three days, the road left the river to cross the Yangi Dawan, at 15,800 feet (4,816 m.) a fairly easy pass, which was followed by the modest 10,750-foot (3,277 m.) Topa Dawan. From there, it was a straightforward march through inhabited country to Karghalik, and on to Yarkand.¹⁰

7. Mason, 1929a: 181-90; 195.

8. Wilson, 1843: 295-96.

9. Mason, 1929b: 10-29; Grant and Mason, 1940: 52-63; Kapadia, 1990: 80, photographs opp. p. 88.

10. Mason, 1929a: 189-95.

The Travellers

The uncounted generation of merchants and pony-men who, over the centuries, regularly undertook the month-long trek over the Karakoram in pursuit of commercial profit, left no written record of its rigours. But for about a century, from 1848 to 1946, it was also taken by travellers from many western countries - mostly British, but also American, German, Italian, Swedish, Czech, Russian, and probably more. These included soldiers, politicians, administrators, diplomats and spies; explorers, surveyors, geologists and naturalists; journalists and missionaries, sportsmen and refugees and even a couple of traders. Two at least of the white men, lost their lives on the trail - the Czech geologist Ferdinand Stoliczka from the effects of altitude on the Dapsang Plain in 1874; and the Scottish trader Andrew Dalglish, hacked to death by a Pathan hardly 100 feet below the crest of the Karakoram Pass in 1888. This was surely one of the toughest routes in the world, but even so murder was hardly one of its normal hazards. Dalglish, who had been taking caravans regularly across the Karakoram for 14 years, was unlucky that time.

Many of the westerners wrote and published their accounts of the journey. Most of them travelled in summer, taking the Khardung-la, Nubra and Saser-la line; several however, once over the Karakoram, travelled down the Yarkand river and took the Yangi Dawan rather than the Suget Dawan and the Sanju or Kilian. Their experiences would have differed somewhat from those of the merchants and the pony-men, but not, perhaps, materially. The same obstacles and hardships were there for both groups, the same fears and doubts and the same risks. No doubt the Sahibs were able, or willing, to make a little more expenditure on equipment, and on ensuring that their pack-animals were in prime condition, and thus be a little better cushioned against the hardships of the way. But these differences would have been marginal. Perceptions no doubt differed, but the experience was essentially the same.

The Bandobast

Before embarking on the expedition across the Karakoram all, native traders and assorted sahibs alike, had to give careful thought

to the bandobast. After the British assumption of responsibility for the trade in the wake of their Commercial Treaty with the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir in 1870, they established a chain of sarais or inns at the various halting-places, for as far as the route lay through inhabited country. The sarai at Khardung, the village just north of the Khardung-la, was perhaps typical. It was described in 1906 as '*a big enclosure with a row of huts and stabling, behind which lies a small garden that irrigation has turned into a little paradise. The ground is covered with thick green grass, and spreading trees cast grateful shade*'.¹¹ Similarly, on the other side of the mountains, in Sinkiang, all the oasis villages through which the route passed boasted sarais, some, like those in Posgam and Karghalik, spacious and clean, and run by syndicates of local women.¹² Once beyond the limits of human habitation there were few such facilities, though the earliest Europeans to reach the Karakoram Pass reported three small stone huts huddled against a rock on the approach to the pass, 'as a place of shelter for travellers in case of stormy or snowy weather'.¹³ At Saser Brangsa at the eastern foot of the Saser-la, '*a sort of rude stable and yard*' was all the sarai there was; it was also temporary home to two men stationed there during the season to keep an eye on the waters of the Shayok, and help travellers across'.¹⁴ Where there were no sarais or shelter-huts the sahibs and perhaps often the merchants and caravan-leaders slept in tents, while the pony-men bivouacked in the open.

Similarly, for as long as the caravans were passing through cultivated areas, they could procure supplies along the way. Within Ladakh, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir collected part of the land revenue due to it from the cultivators in kind - in grain and firewood - and stored it in granaries at the different halting-places for sale to the caravans.¹⁵ The granary at Panamik, the last village before the Karakoram crossing, was naturally a much appreciated facility, and the exploration and survey expeditions, as well as the trade caravans, invariably halted there for a day or two to purchase supplies - either from the Government granary, or by private arrangement with the local people - and to finalise their prepara-

11. Fraser, 1907: 129.

12. Nazarov, 1935: 138, 140-41.

13. Thomson, 1852: 433; Irby, 1863: 223.

14. Fraser, 1907: 146; Lattimore, 1930: 348; Nazarov, 1935: 209.

15. Imperial Gazetteer: 101.

tions. These involved seeing to details like grinding barley and wheat into flour for the men's rations, and checking the horses' shoes.¹⁶ The Earl of Dunmore, who made the crossing in 1890, recorded his arrangements in some detail. On arrival at Panamik, his caravan consisting of 24 men and 38 horses, he added to their strength a further 18 horses, purchased for a total of 900 rupees, five men to manage them, and four porters to carry the tent-poles. The purchase of supplies amounted to 33½ hundredweight of grain for the horses (3,752 lbs., or just over 1,700 kgs); 6½ hundredweight of flour for the men (728 lbs., or 331 kgs); half a ton of firewood for the cooking (just over five quintals), and 20 sheep on the hoof for meat supply. 'We also have with us 3,000 horse-shoe nails, 420 extra horse-shoes, ice-axes, picks, shovels, spades, carpenters' tools etc.'¹⁷ Of the 56 ponies, six were for the sahibs' riding, 28 carried baggage, 18 carried food for the men and horses, and four were carrying firewood. In addition, 60 yak and their drivers were hired to carry the loads across the Karawal Dawan and the Saser-la as far as Saser Brangsa.¹⁸

Dunmore was travelling on beyond Yarkand, to explore in the Pamirs; his preparations were perhaps rather more elaborate than those of the average trader. But they give an idea of what the fitting out of a caravan involved; and the fact that it took 22 horses to carry food and firewood, as against 28 for the baggage, illustrates a fundamental logistical problem. This was particularly grave for the traders, the object of whose journey was to shift as much merchandise on the backs of their pack-animals at as low a cost as possible, while at the same time having to carry rations for men and horses for a minimum of 12 days, from Panamik at least as far as Suget Karawal. This was where the Chinese rulers of Sinkiang established their frontier-post about 1890; subsequently they built a sarai and a supply-depot there. Indeed, according to one account, supplies were forced on the caravans by the officials manning the post, who were not paid a living wage, and reckoned to bridge the subsistence gap by bringing up grain by the donkey-loads from the plains below, and selling it at a profit.¹⁹ Before 1890, it would have been unwise to count on finding supplies before Sanju Bazaar or Kilian Bazaar, a

further week's march.²⁰ Travellers on the winter route would have to be self-sufficient from Shayok village, where the march up the river commenced, for at least 17 days till they reached the hamlet of Kuija-Mazar beyond the Yangi Dawan; but even there the possibilities were limited, and it was not until they reached Kokyar, a further three days' march, that they found reliable sources of supply.²¹ This meant that the number of horses required to carry a given quantity of goods needed to be augmented by an estimated thirty per cent between Panamik and Shahidullah (just beyond Suget Karawal).²² One partial solution was to hire a number of animals at Panamik to carry the supplies for a week's march, after which you loaded the balance on to your own animals and carried on hoping for the best.²³

Another means of maximising your carrying capacity was to use, instead of horses, the shaggy double-humped Bactrian camels of Central Asia, which could carry loads of at least four maunds (320 lbs.; 145 kgs), almost twice that of a horse. Camels were able to forage on the sparse vegetation along the way, and thus could manage with a small daily ration of only two lbs. (1 kg) of grain; and their thick growth of hair rendered them impervious to cold. Their height made them particularly useful for river-crossings, where a pony's load was in danger of getting wet.²⁴ Camels were indeed used a lot as pack animals in Sinkiang, especially for this purpose.²⁵ Some south-bound caravans even took them all the way from Yarkand over the Karakoram Pass and as far as Saser Brangsa; there the goods they carried were trans-shipped on to yak for the crossing of the Saser-la and down to Panamik, where ponies would be available on hire for the rest of the way.²⁶ But although their performance on the trails of the Kun-Lun and the northern flank of the Karakoram was excellent, they had difficulty in snow, and the pads of their feet were delicate and liable to injury on sharp rocks. Thus they were useless on glaciers, and could not be taken over the Saser-la.²⁷

20. Mason, 1929a: 184-87.

21. Ibid.: 192-94.

22. Fraser, 1907: 133.

23. Gompertz, 1928: 239.

24. Moorcroft MSS, D256 pp. 143-44, D258 pp. 66-67; Younghusband, 1896: 223; Nazarov, 1935: 254-55.

25. Parsons, 1927: 33; Roosevelt, 1926: 73.

26. Lattimore, 1930: 349; Dainelli, 1933: 222; Nazarov, 1935: 209.

27. Younghusband, 1896: 223; Himalayan Letters, 1927: 170; Lattimore, 1930: 349; Nazarov, 1935: 136, 254-55.

16. Irby, 1863: 197-98.

17. Dunmore, 1893: 164, 168-69.

18. Ibid.: 171.

19. Ibid.: 224; Lattimore, 1930: 332; Trinkler, 1931: 83.

Over the decades there are occasional reports of camels arriving at Leh, particularly during the 1870s when the British authorities were trying to popularise the Changechenmo route.²⁸ It seems unlikely that more than a very few - if any - ever crossed the glaciated passes of Saser-la or Khardung-la. Those that, having come across the Karakoram Pass, proceeded beyond Saser Brangsa, were probably brought down the Shayok and over the Chang-la. A small number are still to be seen in Nubra, earning their keep in local transport, and most recently as a tourist attraction.

Camels apart, there is occasional mention of caravans of donkeys²⁹ - these would be the big Central Asian animals, not the diminutive Ladakhi breed. But it was the horse, which carried a load of some two to 2½ maunds (160 to 200 lbs.; 73 to 91 kgs) which was the pack animal par excellence on the Karakoram route. In 1820-22 when William Moorcroft was reporting on the trade, the greater part of the carriage was on geldings of two or three breeds from Central Asia. They were not tall, averaging 14 hands; but they were otherwise well adapted to the demands of the route, being '*ugly and of coarse proportions, but remarkable for the great depth and length of the chest and the great strength of their fore legs*'. Moorcroft reckoned that they were not original breeds, but probably derived from crossing Arab sires and selected local mares. Their owners liked to make sure they were fat at the start of a journey thus enabling them to subsist on minimal rations during it; invariably they arrived '*in a state of miserable leanness*'.³⁰

Many of them failed to arrive at all. For some 200 miles through the mountains, the route was '*marked by one long white line stretching for ever in front of the traveller ... glistening on the yellow sand as distinctly as a chalk-mark on a tennis lawn*'.³¹ This was made up of the bones of innumerable pack-animals - mainly horses - that had succumbed to altitude and exhaustion, or had fallen, injuring themselves fatally, on some of the truly appalling ground, especially over the passes. The annual mortality was estimated at 200-300

animals; another estimate was 15 percent of the total.³² It was probably the Saser-la that claimed the greatest number of victims, one traveller counting 90 recently dead horses on the pass or its approaches,³³ while the piles of bones at Saser Brangsa made it '*a perfect Golgotha*'.³⁴ Prudent caravan leaders took some spare horses along, to replace those that fell; but occasionally a caravan might be caught in a storm, and all its animals perish. When that happened, the men simply piled the loads up at the side of the trail, and hurried on, anxious only to save their own lives. Such dumps of merchandise were a feature of the route, and it was noted by many travellers that there was no question of theft - they lay there for months, sometimes it was said for years, till their owners managed to retrieve them.³⁵

Some western travellers assumed that it was the eagerness of the merchants to maximise their profits by overloading their animals with goods and cutting down on the amount of feed carried for them, that was responsible for this terrible mortality.³⁶ This may have been true sometimes. But there were heavy losses amongst the horses of some western expeditions too, although adequate rations had been provided.³⁷ Despite the adaptations noticed by Moorcroft, it would seem simply that the demands of the route were more than many of the horses could take in their stride.

The mortality factor was one of several which drove up the rate of hire of horses beyond Panamik. Within Ladakh, the rates were fixed, and the local people were under the obligation of providing transport, on payment, at every stage.³⁸ Beyond the limit of human habitation, this system broke down, and the rates of hire fluctuated according to the balance of supply and demand. Comparatively, they were so high, that it often worked out cheaper to buy horses than to hire them. At the beginning of the 1870s, the usual rate of hire for a pack-pony for the whole journey from Leh to Yarkand was reported to be in the region of 40 to 50 rupees, going up to an almost

28. Aitchison, 1874: 332; cf. also Punjab, 1862, Appendix A: 7-8.

29. Parsons, 1927: 22.

30. Moorcroft MSS, D244 p. 71, D245 pp. 142-49, D256 p. 145, D258 p. 66-67 D263 p. 73n.; Dainelli, 1933: 272.

31. Fraser, 1907: 262-63.

388

32. Ibid.; Shipton, E., 1950: 502.

33. Fraser, 1907: 135.

34. Mason, 1928: 19.

35. Irby, 1863: 212; Lattimore, 1930: 335; Dainelli, 1933: 213.

36. Fraser, 1907: 137, 263.

37. Mason, 1928: 10, 168; Roosevelt, 1926: 71.

38. Imperial Gazetteer, 1909: 100.

prohibitive 70 rupees in a year when there were few to be had, owing to extra heavy mortality the previous season.³⁹ By 1906, the rate was reckoned at about 65 rupees, while the purchase-price of the same pony might be in the region of 60 rupees, or even less.⁴⁰

The entrepreneurs who hired out the horses were known as kiraiyakash, and this term seems to have been extended to all those who made their living by working with the caravans.⁴¹ There were kiraiyakash at Leh and in the Nubra Valley; on the Sinkiang side, their principal centre is said to have been Karghalik, the town where the various routes over the Karakoram united before Yarkand, the mountain slopes just adjacent to which provided grazing for thousands for horses.⁴² It was in Yarkand itself, however, that they entered into contracts with the merchants. This usually involved the latter in making 'large advances, sometimes amounting to complete pre-payment, to enable the carriers to feed up their ponies, which are half-starved during the winter, and to make suitable preparations for the journey.'⁴³

But the hire of horses was not necessarily the only expense incurred on transport. Even the hardy Yarkandi ponies had a tough time on the glaciated passes - the Khardung-la, the Saser-la and the Sanju Dawan - which it was nearly impossible for them to negotiate while carrying loads. Thus travellers were obliged to hire or requisition yak to carry the baggage or trade-goods across these passes, the horses being led over unladen. Indeed, for communities living in the vicinity of such passes - whether the villagers of Gangles and Khardung on either side of the Khardung-la, or the nomadic Kirghiz of the Karakash Valley at the foot of the Sanju Dawan - the hire of yak to passing caravans was one of their chief means of livelihood.⁴⁴ The Saser-la was serviced by villagers from Nubra. The up caravans would hire yak at Panamik, and use them for the steep Karawal Dawan as well as for the Saser-la. Those coming down found men encamped at Saser Brangsa with yak for hire. In effect, they seem to

have run a kind of shuttle service across the Saser-la, slogging up from Panamik with a north-bound caravan, then waiting at Saser Brangsa for one coming south.⁴⁵ Similarly, no doubt on the Khardung-la and the Sanju Dawan. Sometimes it even happened, when two strings of yak met on the crest of a pass, that their drivers would exchange loads, and each would return the way they had come.⁴⁶ In a year which had seen unusually heavy mortality among the horses, there might be a greater accumulation of goods at the foot of the passes than could be cleared in good time by the available yak. In 1927, one Yarkandi caravan-leader at Khardung was grumbling that he had been kept waiting 20 days for yak transport over the pass.⁴⁷

Yak had another function too - to open the passes at the end of winter. When the snow had melted sufficiently, a herd of yak was driven up to trample out a path.⁴⁸ On the Saser-la, where the glaciers were extensive, and snow-storms and shifting ice could at any time obliterate yesterday's track, they were invaluable in finding a way across.

*'Before essaying the passage of the glacier, it is customary to drive a drove of ten or twelve yaks across to ascertain the route. These in their way sagacious animals, when urged up the side of the glacier, crowd together for a consultation on its edge, and after a good deal of grunting one of them takes the lead, the others following in single file. The leader with his nose down on the snow sniffs and grunts his way cautiously, and when tired, falls back for the next in line to take up the lead, and so on, till land is reached on the other side.'*⁴⁹

Although there were limits to what even yak could do - for example if the snow were simply too deep for them⁵⁰ - their performance in appropriate conditions was magnificent. On the old alignment of the Karawal Dawan,

39. Aitchison, 1874: 372.

40. Fraser, 1907: 133.

41. Aitchison, 1874: 134.

42. Skrine, 1926: 110.

43. Deasy, 1901: 298-99.

44. Moorcroft and Trebeck, I: 400; Lansdell, 1893: 277; Dunmore, 1893: 239; Roosevelt, 1926: 68-69; Gompertz, 1928: 265.

390

45. Irby, 1863: 279; Dunmore, 1893: 171, 175; Parsons, 1927: 15, 20; Nazarov, 1935: 209-10.

46. Young, 1943: 48-49.

47. Lattimore, 1930: 357.

48. Moorcroft MSS, D262 p. 25; Dunmore, 1893: 156; Mason, 1928: 13; Gompertz, 1928: 162.

49. Bellew, 1875: 158.

50. Mason, 1928: 13-14; Himalayan Letters, 1927: 170.

*'there were one or two extremely awkward places that I never imagined any animal could negotiate, but somehow these yaks seem to be possessed of six legs, for when they fall they pick themselves up again before you have time to realise that they have been down.'*⁵¹

*'My yak crawled over big boulders like a tank. His short legs looked to me, each one, as thick as two horse's legs. He had more confidence in them on sloping ice than I have ever had in mine. He ploughed through deep snow as if there were no snow there. He panted like a dog, and hung his tongue out, but kept steadily on, up the ever-steepening grade. The snow on either side of the trail was all marked up where he and his fellows had been dragging their black tongues, licking up snow.'*⁵²

The Journey

All arrangements made, the travellers - whether merchants or foreign visitors - and the caravan-men were ready to embark on their journey. The horses and baggage or merchandise were gathered together in the big Government sarai at Leh, or one of several privately-owned ones. The goods were packed in bundles of one or one-and-a-quarter maunds (80 to 100 lbs.; 36 to 45 kgs), secured one on either side of the horses' pack-saddles; sometimes a smaller one with provisions was placed on top as a makeweight. The first day's march of any expedition was usually a short one, starting at noon or later, and from Leh sometimes going no further than the five miles to Gangles. This was to help the horses and men to ease themselves into the routine of the road, and to iron out any minor problems over the balance and securing of the loads.⁵³ The Khardung-la, the first major obstacle, was crossed after an early start on the second day. Hardly so much as a dip in the crest-line of the Ladakh Range, the Khardung-la was all the more formidable for being tackled at the journey's very outset. Though travellers were acclimatised to Leh's 11,500 feet (3,505 m.) the abrupt ascent to 17,400 feet (5,304 m.) took its toll. Even so seasoned an explorer as Francis Younghusband was taken aback by the crippling headache

and nausea he experienced on his first crossing.⁵⁴ A traveller in 1906, David Fraser, describes it thus:

*'The pass consists of a knife-like ridge with a steep descent on either side. The southern front is faced with huge stones and boulders, among which the track threads its way, twisting hither and thither as it gradually works its way to the top... Immediately over the edge of the ridge one finds oneself upon a glacier that has encumbered the route to Central Asia as far back as records go. Fed from the snow that never leaves the northern slopes of the two low peaks closely flanking the pass, it forms a curtain clinging to the steep descent which cannot be avoided. The surface resembles the appearance of a city of churches, consisting of phalanxes of thin spires and steeples of ice from between which the snow has melted. These hollows are soft and treacherous, and many an exhausted animal laboriously picking his steps over the uneven surface plunges forward upon his chest, never again to recover footing. Under the pass the foothills close in and form a narrow ravine which affords the only possible means of advance. Right down into the ravine, at a fearfully steep angle, hangs the glacier, its foot marked by a series of deep-blue frozen lakes that, far below, end in a silver thread of foaming water. Down this uncanny slope, the patient yaks step warily, tacking backward and forward like ships in a head-wind. A batch of ponies in front are falling and floundering in woeful fashion, though they are unencumbered by loads.'*⁵⁵

Parties coming from the north and having to ascend the glacier found the going even more difficult. The riding-ponies of one group had to be *'hoisted up by men at head and tail'*, and even the yak lurching up under their own steam required men to steady them.⁵⁶ Compared to the Saser-la it might be small beer; but even so the Khardung-la proved too much for some of the pack-animals - some yak as well as horses - whose carcasses and bones made a grisly way-mark.⁵⁷

54. Younghusband, 1896: 224.

55. Fraser, 1907: 127-28.

56. Lattimore, 1930: 358.

57. Bishop, 1894: 99; Fraser, 1907: 126, 128; Featherstone, 1926: 203. Cf. also Thomson, 1852: 188; Bellew, 1875: 146-48; Mason, 1928: 13-14; Shipton, E., 1950: 499. The motor road over the Khardung-la today takes a different line from

51. Dunmore, 1893: 175.

52. Himalayan Letters, 1927: 88.

53. Dainelli, 1933: 272.

From the pass the trail wound down past Khardung village into the wide valley of the Shayok. Depending on the season, the river could constitute a serious obstacle. When it was in spate, travellers might have to wait several days for the water to subside.⁵⁸ Even then it was by no means easy. It took Thomas Thomson the whole of 26 July 1847 to get across the four major and several minor channels through which it meandered at its confluence with the Nubra.

*'The ford was a most intricate one, each branch being crossed obliquely and at a different point from the adjacent ones. The united breadth of all the streams could not, I think, have been less than half a mile. The velocity of the water was so great, that though the depth nowhere, I think, exceeded 3½ feet, and was more usually about 2½, people on foot appeared to have the utmost difficulty in retaining their footing, and the loaded men had to be supported by one or two without loads on each side. In the more difficult parts, two men placed themselves on each side of my horse's head, to guide him in the proper road, and two more at each stirrup to give him support in case of need.'*⁵⁹

As part of its policy of limited encouragement to the Central Asian trade, the Imperial Government did, through the British Joint Commissioner, make some attempts to render the crossing easier. For a few years in the 1890s, a boat was provided at a point where the river flows in a single channel, the people of the adjoining village of Satti being obliged to work it, ferrying men and loads while the horses were swum across unladen.⁶⁰ Later, a suspension bridge was built at Thirit,⁶¹ but both boat and bridge were in their turn swept away in the flash-floods to which the Shayok was periodically subject,⁶² and in the last years of the trade, as a century earlier, travellers had no option but to ford the river.⁶³

that of the old pony route, and crosses the watershed at a rather higher point.

58. Irby, 1863: 189-92.

59. Thomson, 1852: 403.

60. Dunmore, 1893: 161; Bishop, 1894: 68.

61. Featherstone, 1926: 187; Mason, 1928: 14.

62. See above: - of this paper.

63. Bishop, 1894: 70; Parsons, 1927: 9, 11; Mason, 1929a: 182; Young, 1943: 52; Shipton, D., 1950: 28.

At their confluence, the valleys of the Shayok and the Nubra broaden out into wide sandy flats. The altitude is a little lower than Leh - just over 10,000 feet (3,048 m.) - the climate less extreme, and the vegetation more extensive. The floor of the Shayok valley was uncultivated due to the danger of floods; but the oases on the alluvial fans above the river were fertile, with extensive willow and poplar plantation; and below them, as in the valley of the Nubra, grew dense thickets of thorny scrub which the villagers used to fence their fields against the hundreds and thousands of horses of the passing caravans. The entire district is known simply as Nubra, and traveller after traveller was struck by its charms.⁶⁴ During the trading season, July to September, the trails were alive with the comings and goings of the caravans, their horses' harness hung with bells and decorated with coloured ribbons. There was, as one traveller remarked, an *'air of good-humoured bustle and cheerfulness on all sides'*.⁶⁵ So apparent to visitors arriving from Leh, the beauties of Nubra were all the more appreciated by travellers from the north, who found here the first permanent human habitation since leaving the plains of Sinkiang ten days or a fortnight earlier, and whose journey since then had been through the almost complete sterility of the Kun-lun and the Karakoram.⁶⁶

Most caravans halted for a day or two at Panamik, the last major village in Ladakh, either to stock and refit in preparation for the onward journey through the mountains, or to rest and recuperate from its rigours.⁶⁷ Panamik thus became a centre where villagers from the whole of Nubra would congregate, to negotiate with the caravan-leaders for the supply of provisions, or the hire of ponies or yak; or simply to make trifling purchases from the caravans' loads. During the heyday of the trade, the village was teeming in summer with merchants and pony-men while their horses grazed in thorn-enclosed lucerne fields leased out by the day from the cultivators.

64. Moorcroft and Trebeck, 1837, Vol. I: 401-02; Thomson, 1852: 191, 193-94, 196-97, 405; Fraser, 1907: 130; Dainelli, 1933: 108.

65. Featherstone, 1926: 189.

66. Nazaroff, 1935: 223-32.

67. Irby, 1863: 197-202; Dunmore, 1893: 164-69; Fraser, 1907: 133-34; Gompertz, 1928: 239-40, 247.

*'On many of the threshing-floors and on uncultivated pieces of ground here and there in the oasis were the great tents of the caravan-men, surrounded by bales of merchandise and guarded by dogs which snarled ferociously. The caravan-tents were generally placed by preference at the two opposite edges of the oasis, and the long, narrow, winding main alley of the village, which goes through it from one end to the other, hemmed in by low walls and hedges, was frequently traversed by long files of laden animals belonging to arriving or departing caravans. The whole alley would be filled with them and often in complete confusion, for Yarkandi horses are accustomed to almost unlimited space and not to the narrow winding paths through the oases of Ladakh; if a pack knocked against a wall or a calf came along in the opposite direction, there was always some troublesome or nervous horse which would try to bolt. It would not, of course, get its way, but the whole of the caravan would be thrown into a kind of revolt - other horses being violently pushed and giving back energetic, resounding kicks, packs falling off or in danger of falling, drivers running up, hoarse shouts, the thud of a kick in the belly of some troublesome beast neighings, the whole caravan stopped, the road blocked up on either side. Then, with packs made fast again and order re-established, they would move on again at their slow regular pace, accompanied by the silvery jingle of all their little bells.'*⁶⁸

Soon after Panamik, the road left the valley by the Karawal Dawan to plunge into the mountains of the Saser Spur. Karawal is the Turki word meaning frontier-post, and it may be assumed that in the days of independent Ladakh the ridge bounding the Nubra Valley to the east represented the limit of the Ladakh kings' jurisdiction. Till the early years of this century, the ascent started from Changlung, about 10 miles beyond Panamik, from where the road zig-zagged *'over bare granite rock, with scarce a vestige of vegetation, for about 3,500 feet of extremely laborious climbing'*⁶⁹ At some time between 1899, when William and Fanny Workman crossed it, and 1906, the date of David Fraser's journey, the alignment was modified in what was perhaps the most substantial improvement to the

route to be undertaken by the Government at any time. Now, the track left the valley well before Changlung by an artificial track constructed *'up the face of a huge cliff, the amount of blasting and buttressing being prodigious, and the cost doubtless very heavy'*.⁷⁰ This cliff forms one side of the gorge of a stream coming down from the Saser-la, the Thulambuti Chu; it is described vividly by Eric Shipton:

*'It would be difficult to imagine a less likely-looking place for the continuation of the great trade-route to Chinese Turkestan. It was manifestly impossible to get up the gorge, its floor wholly occupied by a thundering river, its sheer walls almost touching each other a thousand feet above. To the right of its mouth the great precipices continued perpendicular and unbroken; to the left was a vast slab of smooth rock, two thousand feet high, very steep and, apparently from below, not offering a foothold for a goat. As we gazed up it, however, we gradually detected a tiny black line moving, ant-like, across the slab about half-way up. This was one of the caravans of ponies and camels that... had made an earlier start from Panamik. It looked like some fantastic conjuring trick, until we realised that a wonderfully well-engineered path had been constructed zig-zag up this remarkable place, to turn the gorge and permit access to the valley beyond. From below, this path was almost invisible owing to the steep tilt of the rock.'*⁷¹

And so on through the mountains to the foot of the Saser-la. This most feared of all the passes was *'positively inundated'* by not one, but a whole complex of glaciers - five according to one account - flowing from the mountains north and south to form an ice-field on the saddle itself, from which further glaciers flowed down in both directions.⁷² Since there was no way a permanent trail could be constructed over the shifting ice, it was up to the first caravan each year to work out a route which might, with luck, last the season. As one observer put it:

'The traders' chief object is to avoid the first forcing of the passes, and so you will find men kept in Leh to send word north

68. Dainelli, 1933: 222-23.

69. Thomson, 1852: 409-410.

396

70. Workman, 1900: 27; Fraser, 1907: 135; Mason, 1929a: 180, 182.

71. Shipton, E., 1950: 501.

72. Fraser, 1907: 134; Mason, 1928: 17.

*if a caravan is leaving Leh, and men on the Shyok side of Saser waiting to send news of the approach of any party from the north. Eventually some extra stout-hearted soul does risk the first crossing, and then the caravans begin to move.*⁷³

The first problem was to get on to the glaciers, as their snouts were impossible to climb. The wretched pack-animals were thus obliged to reach the level of the ice by scrambling up the moraines, with their unstable surfaces and sharp rocks. They suffered terribly, and the ground was stained with blood, both from cut fetlocks, and from blood-vessels ruptured by the strain of the climb from 15,000 odd feet (4,752 m.) in the valley at the glacier's foot to 17,480 feet (5,328 m.) at the crest of the pass. No wonder so many of them succumbed to this extreme effort, particularly those on the downward march, weakened by so many days of toil and privation at over 15,000 feet.⁷⁴ Getting them across was hardly less of an ordeal for the drivers, for there were stretches where, because of the roughness of the moraine or the slipperiness of the ice, every pony, even though unladen, needed individual attention; and others where, a zig-zag alignment having been established, men had to be stationed at each bend to direct the animals in the right path. Sometimes, it was impossible to avoid crevasses, negotiating which could involve dropping 300 feet (136 m.) and then immediately scrambling up again. It was wise to get under weigh many hours before dawn, as the sun not only softened the snow, but also tended to dislodge stones embedded in the ice of the glaciers above, which came crashing down on to the path.⁷⁵

To the great climber Eric Shipton, who crossed it in 1946 in perfect weather conditions, the Saser-la presented few difficulties - considered as a mountaineering problem. But it was the kind of ground that, as a climber, he would never have considered taking pack-animals over:

'I had repeatedly to remind myself that I was not on an expedition engaged in a desperate attempt to get pack-transport to a high base camp on a mountain or into a piece of unexplored country, but that I was performing a necessary

*journey along a regular trade-route to take up a government appointment.'*⁷⁶

Saser Brangsa, the camping-place beyond the pass, offered few amenities to compensate the traveller for the ordeal of the crossing. It was the terminus for the yak-shuttle from Panamik,⁷⁷ and the final resting-place of scores of pack-animals whose bones and carcasses littered the site. Piles of stones marked the graves of Hajis who had died en route. Several travellers remarked on the squalor engendered by these relics, together with the detritus of the passing caravans, and on the general air of desolation.⁷⁸

*'Nor was the view inspiring. As you sit there in the sunset, and look out over the valley, I think you can safely say that, although you have marched 350 miles to get here, never before have you seen anything so lifeless and void of beauty as this Upper Shayok Valley.'*⁷⁹

This was where the route straight up the Shayok diverged from that via the Depsang Plain; after the advance of the glaciers in 1925 and the floods which occurred in 1926, 1929 and 1932,⁸⁰ the former seems to have been abandoned altogether. Shipton, taking the Depsang route in 1946, made a detour up the Shayok especially to observe the site of the ice-dam; he found the glaciers in retreat, the most advanced ice-cliffs being a couple of hundred yards from the cliffs on the opposite side.⁸¹ Even so, the going was far from easy, since the valley was hardly more than a ravine, and the river had to be forded over and over again, its bed in some places being treacherous with quicksands.⁸²

Not that the alternative, the Depsang trail, was exactly inviting. First of all, the Shayok had to be crossed. This was best done early in the morning, when the water-level was at its lowest, before the stream became swollen with meltwater. For several years from the early

73. Gompertz, 1928: 229.

74. Fraser, 1907: 134-35; Dainelli, 1933: 218.

75. Dunmore, 1893: 180-82; Mason, 1928: 18.

76. Shipton, E., 1950: 502.

77. See above in this paper.

78. Parsons, 1927: 17; Lattimore, 1930: 348-49; Dainelli, 1933: 218.

79. Gompertz, 1928: 258.

80. See above in this paper.

81. Shipton, E., 1950: 504.

82. Ibid.: 503; Shaw, 1871: 433.

1880s, the local authorities in charge of the trade kept ferry-boats at Saser Brangsa for the use of the caravans; but by 1906, they were reported to have been swept away in one of the floods and smashed to pieces. In the absence of a boat, two or three men were employed to keep a watch on the water, and to help travellers to ford it.⁸³ Although the river flowed in several channels in a wide gravelly bed, the current was still very swift; and not only was the water itself ice-cold, but it also brought down blocks of ice broken from the glacier-snouts, estimated at anything from 50 to 150 lbs. (23 to 68 kgs), and travelling between 5 and 15 miles an hour. Even a mounted man could not avoid getting his feet soaked and nearly frozen, while *'the poor creatures who had done it on foot, stripped to the waist, were grey with cold'*⁸⁴ Nor was the next stretch, up a gully containing the bed of a tributary stream, much better:

*'This gully was nothing but a deep chasm with tremendous precipices on either hand. The torrent rushing down just cannoned backward and forward from side to side, and as there was no road but the bed of the stream we had to do likewise. We were four hours in that river-bed, and it is no exaggeration to say that we crossed the water at least one hundred and fifty times. It was usually 30 feet wide, and deep enough to touch the pony's belly and keep one's feet below zero.'*⁸⁵

This refers to a journey early in the season, in 1906. When Shipton travelled from Leh to Yarkand 40 years later, he did it in late September, and had little difficulty in fording the Shayok or its tributary. But he was greatly struck by the next part of the route. He had made good speed along the stream-bed, which contained only a little water.

'After we had gone along it for several miles, the tracks in the sand suddenly ceased. There was an inconspicuous crack in the right-hand wall of the gorge, but at first I could not believe that the way lay there. In the first place, it seemed impossible that it could lead anywhere but into the bowels of the mountain; secondly, it did not look wide enough to admit a pony, let alone

*a camel. However, the evidence of the tracks was irrefutable; so, dismounting, we led the ponies into it. Inside, the crack, or chimney as it would be called in climbing parlance, became a steep gully, so narrow that in several places the pack-animals must have had to be unloaded to get through between the vertical walls. Again it seemed incredible that we were on a trade-route, and that anyone could have bothered in the first place to search for a route in such an unlikely-looking place.'*⁸⁶

Another couple of days of winding through the gorges with which the mountains are riven brought the route out on to the Depsang Plain. This 17,500-foot (5,335 m.) plateau was described with uncharacteristic vividness in an official report, that of the second Forsyth Mission which crossed it in 1873: *'this bleak barren undulating plateau, from which the world around subsides, the highest hilltops only appearing above the horizon.'*⁸⁷ *'There is no vestige of vegetation up here: nothing but gravel in long low sweeps meets the eye. A few small lakes of deepest ultramarine float mirage-like in the hollows, and at their edges disport lonely dabchicks.'*⁸⁸ Bleak enough in summer, in winter the Depsang Plain was unspeakably desolate - bitterly cold, full of snow, and soggy underfoot.

After the hazards and difficulties of the Saser-la, the Karakoram Pass - though almost 1,000 feet (305 m.) higher at 18,300 feet (5,578 m.) was a comparatively tame affair. It was at a point on the watershed where the configuration of the surrounding mountains attracted but little precipitation, thus it was rarely if ever snowbound. After leaving the Depsang Plain and fording the Chip-chap, longest of the Shayok's headwaters, travellers arrived at a halting-place called Daulat Beg Oldi. Oldi means died in Turki; the name presumably commemorates some disaster that overtook a caravan led by Daulat Beg. A little further on, at Karakoram Polu, there were a few rough shelter-huts. From there, the track led up a gentle valley, tributary to the Chip-chap, for six or eight miles, (10 to 13 kms) leaving the stream to climb a few hundred feet to the dip in the valley's bounding ridge, which formed the actual pass.⁸⁹

83. Ramsay, 1886; Fraser, 1907: 146; Lattimore, 1930: 348.

84. Fraser, 1907: 147-48; cf. also Shaw, 1871: 434-35.

85. Fraser, 1907: 148.

86. Shipton, E., 1950: 504-05.

87. Cit. Dunmore, 1893: 192-93.

88. Fraser, 1907: 150-51.

89. Thomson, 1852: 433-34; Mason, 1929a: 183-84; Shipton, E., 1950: 505-06.

Rather unexpectedly, for all the barrenness of the route and of the surrounding mountains - the route-book repeating with monotonous regularity in its descriptions of the various stages of the march, 'Grass nil', or at best 'Grass scanty'⁹⁰ - there was no shortage of wildlife. Not that the presence of vultures should occasion any surprise; they are described as patrolling the route, and flocking greedily to feast - sometimes to the point of being too gorged to fly - off the carcasses of the pack-animals as they fell, were abandoned and died. The task of scavenging the route was also shared by wolves and hyenas; and several travellers remarked on the ravens that circled above the very crest of the Karakoram Pass.⁹¹ These were such a well-known feature that they had passed into legend in Ladakh. Godfrey Vigne, although he got no farther than Nubra, heard about them, together with the belief that 'once in a hundred years, one with white feathers makes its appearance.'⁹²

For these scavengers, there was obviously no problem of subsistence; but what of the great flocks of Tibetan antelope recorded by traveller after traveller on the very most elevated part of the route, on both sides of the Karakoram Pass? A.H. Irby, apparently the first Englishman actually to cross the Pass, an Army officer on leave going after shikar in 1860, stalked antelope on the Dapsang Plain, and noticed many more during the first three days' march on the other side of the Pass. Robert Shaw found them at Gyapshan, where the main branch of the Shayok emerges from the Rimo Glacier; and the presence of great numbers of them in the tract of barren ridges and valleys between the Karakoram and Suget Passes was recorded by many other travellers after Irby.⁹³ But not even the naturalists among them could figure out how these herbivores subsisted. 'Their only food seemed to be the sparse tufts of dried grass that were scattered over the surrounding country at very infrequent intervals. They seemed to thrive on this meagre diet, for those we killed were as fat as butter-balls.'⁹⁴

90. Mason, 1929a: 181-98, *passim*.

91. Thomson, 1852: 435; Irby, 1863: 226; Dunmore, 1893: 203; Fraser, 1907: 151, 263-64; Roosevelt, 1926: 62; Dainelli, 1933: 215.

92. Vigne, 1842, vol. II: 361.

93. Irby: 222-23, 227, 231, 233; Shaw, 1871: 432; Dunmore, 1893: 205-06; Fraser, 1907: 160-62; Lattimore, 1930: 336, 338; Nazaroff, 1935: 193-94.

94. Roosevelt, 1926: 63.

Once over the Karakoram Pass, the obstacles were perhaps not so great as on the south side. The winter route dropped steadily from the watershed, following the valley of the upper Yarkand river, which it crossed and re-crossed repeatedly, till at just over 12,000 feet (3,658 m.) it struck off towards the 15,800-foot (4,816 m.) Yangi Dawan. Not a difficult pass in itself, the Yangi Dawan was approached by a narrow gorge, filled with boulders, among which the pack animals slipped and stumbled. After that there was only the hiccup of the Topa Dawan, a mere 10,750 feet, (3,277 m.) though also steep and rocky and difficult for the animals to negotiate, before the trail started the final descent through oasis villages to the south Sinkiang plain.⁹⁵

The summer route was more of a roller-coaster, the caravans having to slog down one river-valley, up another, over a pass and down again - a relentless grinding effort that took its toll of man and beast. It was not till the Suget Dawan - like the Karakoram a relatively easy pass - had been crossed on the fourth day, that it dropped below 15,500 feet (4,725 m.), coming down to some 12,000 feet (3,658 m.) at Shahidullah on the Karakash river. A sufficiently god-forsaken spot, Shahidullah was briefly a focus of international controversy. Before a line was drawn on the map between the empires of the British and the Chinese, the entire swathe of the Karakoram and Kun-lun ranges was a no-man's land, unclaimed and unadministered. In an attempt to protect the caravans against the brigands from Hunza who periodically raided the route,⁹⁶ the Kashmir Government in the late 1860s constructed a small fort at Shahidullah. They maintained a garrison there for only a couple of years, after which it was occupied by troops of the briefly independent kingdom of East Turkestan. When the Chinese re-established their authority in 1877, it fell into disrepair. The Imperial Government were anxious that neither they themselves nor their vassal state of Kashmir should assume any political responsibilities north of the formidable natural barrier of the mountains; thus the border settlement when it was reached about 1890 was based on the watershed principle, Kashmir's residual claim to Shahidullah being disallowed. Although their jurisdiction extended right up to the Karakoram Pass, the Chinese established their frontier post of Suget Karawal just a mile or two north of the abandoned fort.⁹⁷

95. Mason, 1929a: 193-95; Shipton, E., 1950: 506-07; Shipton, D., 1950: 32-35.

96. Rizvi, 1994: 38-39.

97. Shaw, 1871: 107; Dunmore, 1893: 224-25; Mehra, 1992: 71.

From Shahidullah, the summer route followed the Karakash river down for a day or two before splitting into two branches, via the Sanju Dawan and the Kilian Dawan. Of the trans-Karakoram passes, the Sanju Dawan seems to have been the most difficult, though the summer caravans were often obliged to take it as it was open longer than the Kilian Dawan. The approach to the Sanju was a steep ascent, gaining 7,600 feet (2,316 m.) in five miles (8 kms) up 'a gully just a fissure in the mountains, chokeful of unspeakable debris';⁹⁸ the crest, reached after a final almost perpendicular scramble, was no more than six feet (two metres) wide; and the descent to the north was so precipitous that only yak could negotiate it with loads. But the view from the top made up for all the effort. A lush grass-covered valley was studded with flowers, and dotted with the tents of the nomadic Kirghiz, the herdspeople who provided the necessary yak.⁹⁹

The ridge of the Kun-Lun crossed by the Kilian and Sanju Passes represented the last major mountain-obstacle on the way, from which river-valleys led down to the plains of South Sinkiang. But river-valleys can present their own problems. Below the Sanju Dawan, the trail forded the Sanju river no fewer than 16 times; unless camels were available there was every possibility of valuable merchandise or baggage getting soaked.¹⁰⁰ Occasionally when the river was in spate, travellers were forced to take an alternative route from the old frontier-post at Tam Karawal, via the Chuchu Dawan, long and steep but not otherwise difficult, across a ridge to the next river-valley, and so on to Sanju Bazaar.¹⁰¹

Tam Karawal, and Kilian Bazaar on the other route, represented the southern limits of permanent habitation. Now it was fairly plain sailing, a gentle descent to the plains through oasis villages, the Sanju and Kilian routes reuniting at a place called Oi-Toghrak.¹⁰² But now, in contrast to the extreme cold of the high mountains - which in November was so great that even the hardest of surveyors, W. H. Johnson remarked on it, saying that his beard 'used to be

covered with icicles while marching along the road in the sun'¹⁰³ - summer travellers started suffering from the heat. Most of Sinkiang is desert, and a principal feature of its climate is its dust-haze; the summer's heat could be intense.¹⁰⁴ This was partly compensated for by the easier going, the existence of sarais, and the ready availability of supplies for men and animals. Sinkiang was famous for its fruit, especially its melons, and several travellers recalled their delighted enjoyment of these, a real luxury after all their privations in the mountains.¹⁰⁵

There was a strong tradition of hospitality in Sinkiang, and anyone regarded as a VIP was treated lavishly, local dignitaries forcing them all along the way to partake of collations consisting of 'bowls of soup, huge platters of pilao, roast-fowls by the dozen, fruit, bread, etc.'¹⁰⁶ Arrival in Yarkand brought more of the same. The Earl of Dunmore was entertained by the Indian merchants there to a dinner consisting of ten plates of sweetmeats; piles of peaches, nectarines, grapes and melons; 29 savoury dishes including bread, chapattis, eggs, half a sheep roasted, fowls, kebabs, pulao, meatballs stewed with cabbage, cutlets and vegetable dishes; tea, milk and sweet meringues called nasha Allah; and soup. He received a gift of two fine horses from the host, and from other merchants two pieces of old Chinese silk; two boxes of sugar-candy and two packets of Russian wax candles; four splendid Khotan carpets, two of them silk; four more pieces of Chinese silk; four old Chinese bowls; two teapots; and eight baskets of fruit.¹⁰⁷

The Kiraiyakash

The success of any expedition over this gruelling route - whether its aim were commerce, diplomacy, espionage, exploration, shikar, pilgrimage, or simply globe-trotting - was entirely dependent on the caravan-staff, many of whom must have brought generations of experience to bear on their work. They were known as kiraiyakash, a term which strictly speaking means someone who gives horses on

98. Fraser, 1907: 169.

99. Dunmore, 1893: 245-47; Fraser, 1907: 169-70; Roosevelt, 1926: 69-70.

100. Roosevelt, 1926: 73.

101. Dunmore, 1892: 252-53; Parsons, 1927: 31-32.

102. Mason, 1929a: 185-87.

404

103. Johnson, 1867: 10.

104. Dunmore, 1893: 265-70; Roosevelt, 1926: 74.

105. Shipton, E., 1950: 507; Shipton, D., 1950: 36.

106. Shaw, 1871: 172-73.

107. Dunmore, 1893: 295, 297-98.

hire (kiraiya), but which seems to have been extended to all those working the caravan-route.¹⁰⁸ Although they included men from both Sinkiang and Ladakh, it was almost always the latter who impressed the western travellers. Many, though by no means, all of them were Arghons, Sunni Muslims of Leh, a community arising originally from marriages between Kashmiri or Yarkandi merchants and Ladakhi women. One observer described them as '*apt to be a bit rough and quarrelsome, like packers and teamsters in other countries*',¹⁰⁹ but of their skill, there was no doubt.

*'I certainly never saw men more fitted for their work than one or two of that class whom I met at Leh, and saw removing goods from Leh to the Nubra valley. Except sailors, I could not conceive men so handy with packages, and the way they loaded and unloaded the animals was marvellous.'*¹¹⁰

Loading and unloading at the beginning and end of each day's march was only the start of the caravan-men's duties. Their skills were put to the test nowhere more than on the glacier-passes, with the necessary trans-shipment of the loads from horses to yak, and then back on to the horses; and the horses themselves having to be attended to and led, sometimes individually, over awkward, stretches, up or down a moraine, or through a maze of crevasses.¹¹¹ The ascent of the Khardung-la from the north could involve ponies being '*hoisted up by men at head and tail*'.¹¹² But the glaciers were far from being the only bad spots. At times the trail narrowed, either through a mountain gorge that was little more than a crack, or along a ledge round a spur jutting into a river. There was barely room for the animals themselves, let alone their burdens, which then had to be off-loaded, together with the cumbersome pack-saddles, and carried across by the men, the horses being led over unladen.¹¹³ A similar manoeuvre might be necessary at a point where the going underfoot was so rough and rocky - as one party found between Shahidullah and the Sanju Pass - that in order to fill the spaces between the rocks and give the horses a footing, they had to lay the pack-saddles on the

ground.¹¹⁴ The sometimes swollen rivers of Sinkiang confronted them with further difficulties. If camels were not available to get the baggage or merchandise across dry, then each and every bundle had to be carried across by a man holding it on his head, while another steadied him in the swirling current.¹¹⁵

Even where the going was relatively easy, the pony-men had to remain constantly vigilant, to help any animals that got into difficulties, or to spot a slipping load and secure it in time.¹¹⁶ One traveller reported them '*always ranging off the road, removing shoes from dead animals, and when the collection gets big enough they hide it for use on the return journey*'.¹¹⁷ With all this, nearly all their western employers were impressed by their equanimity, even cheerfulness. Some had enough breath, even at 15,000 feet (4,572 m.) to sing or '*tootle plaintive short melodious airs on a double-barrelled flute of polished old brown wood They grinned and laughed and tumbled over themselves to help us, and were the most willing, stout-hearted and handy men we had throughout our travels*'.¹¹⁸ Other travellers gave them similar testimonials:

*'There is not the slightest doubt that the men we have with us are the very best pony-men in the world; they are the hardest workers I ever saw; with a thorough knowledge of their business, they are always cheery, and generally sing when things look blackest.'*¹¹⁹

While no doubt kiraiyakash from Ladakh and Yarkand made up the majority of individuals undertaking the trans-Karakoram journey, there were other types too. Prominent naturally were the merchants drawn from a wide area of India and Central Asia: from the Punjab, Kangra, Kashmir, Kishtwar, Poonch and the North-West Frontier; from Badakshan and Ghazni in Afghanistan, from Bokhara and Andezjan in West Turkestan, as well as from Yarkand and

108. Aitchison, 1874: 134.

109. Himalayan Letters, 1927: 189.

110. Aitchison, 1874: 134.

111. Dunmore, 1893: 181-82; Mason, 1928: 18.

112. Lattimore, 1930: 358.

113. Dunmore, 1893: 238; Shipton, E., 1950: 505.

114. Dunmore, 1893: 237.

115. Ibid. pp. 280-82.

116. Lattimore, 1930: 351.

117. Parsons, 1927: 24.

118. Lattimore, 1930: 326.

119. Dunmore, 1893: 239.

Kashgar.¹²⁰ The Central Asian merchants - described as 'burly fair-skinned men with curious felt leg-wrappings and broad-brimmed felt hats'¹²¹ - were conspicuous, being dressed in 'a long outer robe reaching nearly to the ground, open in front and showing a shorter undercoat girt at the waist; frequently a white turban ... and ... fine black leather boots.'¹²² The road also attracted the occasional oddball, like the one who approached the Earl of Dunmore at his camp in Panamik, asking permission to attach himself to Dunmore's caravan:

*'a tall gaunt apparition, accompanied by four monkeys ... He turned out to be a Pathan who had been so successful in selling some performing monkeys to the Chinese in Yarkand last year, that he determined to make another venture.'*¹²³

But the lure of commercial profit was not the only inducement to travellers to undertake the gruelling march across the Karakoram. From South Sinkiang, the Karakoram was the most direct route to Mecca; and the hardships of the way were irrelevant to the aspiring Hajis. These included not only men in the prime of life, but also family groups with old men, sick people and women; a young mother might even have a baby at the breast.¹²⁴ The women were often indistinguishable from the men, both in their clothing, and in their stoic endurance of hardship and privation.¹²⁵ In 1906, David Fraser encountered an old merchant, Haji Rahim Shah, a Pathan originally from Bajaur north of the Khyber Pass, who had settled down and married in Khotan. He had prospered greatly, making numerous trading expeditions across the Karakoram to Leh and the Punjab; now he was returning to Khotan with his son, after performing the Haj. Fraser had his doubts as to whether the old pilgrim's feeble frame would survive the rigours of the march, but the Haji himself was serene, for to die on the road to or from Mecca was to go straight to Paradise.¹²⁶

120. Irby, 1863: 213, 215, 229, 279; Aitchison, 1874: 337, 356; Lansdell, 1893: 233-34; Mason, 1928: 18.

121. Gompertz, 1926: 201.

122. Featherstone, 1926: 195; cf. also Shaw, 1971: 11-12.

123. Dunmore, 1893: 170-71.

124. Dainelli, 1933: 216.

125. Gompertz, 1928: 256.

126. Fraser, 1907: 171-73.

Pilgrimage and commerce - the two major motives for travel in the pre-modern era. In the world of Haji Rahim Shah, no journey was so formidable that it could not be undertaken; no mountain range so high that a pass could not be found through it; no river so deep or so rapid that it could not be forded. It is a world that the political and technological changes of the 20th century have destroyed irrevocably, so that today the barren heights of the Karakoram and the Kun-lun are deserted by all except the raven and the antelope - and the military of three nations.

Bibliography

(1) Unpublished and Archival Material

Moorcroft MSS: Moorcroft Collection in the Oriental and India Office Collection, London. Reference are to the European Manuscript Collection, to which there is a comprehensive guide in Kaye, G.: India Office Library: Catalogue of Manuscripts in European Languages (Vol. II, Part 2, section 1, 1937).

Parsons, A.E.B. 1927. "Leh to Kashgar, 1927", typescript, Himalayan Club Library, India International Centre, New Delhi.

Ramsay, H. 1986. Summary of Correspondence on the Yarkand Trade by H. Ramsay, British Joint Commissioner, Ladakh, forwarded with his letter dt. 27 September 1886 to Resident, Kashmir. Foreign Secret F, June 1887, 167-178, National Archives of India.

(2) Published Books and Articles

Aitchison, J.E.T. 1874. *Handbook of the Trade Products of Leh*. Calcutta.

Bellew, H.W. 1875. *Kashmir to Kashgar - A Narrative of the Journey of the Embassy to Kashgar in 1873-74*. London.

Bernier, F. n.d. *Travels in the Mogul Empire* (tr. Irving Brock, ed. A Constable). Westminster.

Bishop, I. 1894. *Among the Tibetans*. London.

- Dainelli, G. 1933. *Buddhists and Glaciers of Western Tibet*. London.
- Deasy, H.H.P. 1902. *In Tibet and Chinese Turkestan*. London.
- Dunmore, Earl of 1893. *The Pamirs*, Vol.1, London.
- Featherstone, B.K. 1926. *An Unexplored Pass*. London.
- Fraser, D. 1907. *The Marches of Hindustan*. London. (Repr. as Transhimalayas Unveiled, New Delhi, 1987).
- Gompertz, H.L. 1926. *The Road to Lamaland*. London.
- Gompertz, H.L. 1928. *Magic Ladakh*. London.
- Grant, I.H.L. & MASON, K. 1940. "The Upper Shyok Glaciers, 1939". In *Himalayan Journal*, Vol.12. 52-63.
- Himalayan Letters. 1927. *The Himalayan Letters of Gypsy Davy and Lady Ba*. Cambridge.
- Imperial Gazetteer. 1909. Imperial Gazetteer of India: Provincial Series: Kashmir and Jammu, Calcutta.
- Irby, A.H. 1863. *Diary of a Hunter from the Punjab to the Karakoram Mountains*. London.
- Kapadia, H. 1990. "East of Saser la". In *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol.46, 1988-89.
- Johnson, W.H. 1867. "Report on his Journey to Ilchi, the Capital of Khotan, in Chinese Tartary". In *Journal of the Royal Geographical Society*, Vol.37.
- Lansdell, H. 1893. *Chinese Central Asia, A Ride to Little Tibet*. London.
- Lattimore, O. 1930. *High Tartary*. Boston.
- Mason, K. 1928. *Exploration of the Shaksgam Valley and Aghil Ranges, 1926* (Records of the Survey of India, vol.22). Dehra Dun.
- Mason, K. 1929a. *Routes in the Western Himalaya, Kashmir, & c. Vol.1. Punch, Kashmir and Ladakh*. (2nd edition). Calcutta.
- Mason, K. 1929b. "Indus Floods and Shyok Glaciers". In *The Himalayan Journal* Vol.1.
- Mehra, P. 1992. *An 'Agreed' Frontier: Ladakh and India's Northernmost Borders, 1847-1947*. Delhi.
- Moorcroft, W. & Trebeck, G. 1837. *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan &c.* (ed. H. H. Wilson). London. (Repr. New Delhi, 1971).

- Nazaroff, P.S. 1935. *Moved On! From Kashgar to Kashmir*. London.
- Punjab, 1862. *Government of the Punjab: Report on the Trade and Resources of the Countries on the North-Western Boundary of British India*. Lahore.
- Rizvi, J. 1994. "The trans-Karakoram trade in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries". In *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol.31, No.1. New Delhi.
- Rizvi, J. 1995. "Merchants and Mountains - the Trade Routes of North-West India". In *The Himalayan Journal*, Vol.51. Bombay.
- Roosevelt, T. & K. 1926. *East of the Sun and West of the Moon*. London.
- Shaw, R. 1871. *Visits to High Tartary, Yarkand and Kashgar*. London. (Repr. Hong Kong, 1984).
- Shipton, D. 1950. *The Antique Land*. London. (Repr. Hong Kong, 1987).
- Shipton, E. 1950. *The Mountains of Tartary*, London. (Repr. as part of The Six Mountain Travel Books, London, 1985)
- Skrine, C.P. 1926. *Chinese Central Asia*. London.
- Thomson, T. 1852. *Western Himalaya and Tibet*. London.
- Trinkler, E. 1931. *The Stormswept Roof of High Asia*. London.
- Vigne, G. 1842. *Travels in Kashmir, Ladakh, Iskardo &c.* London. (Repr. New Delhi, 1981)
- Wilson, H.H. 1843. "Travels beyond the Himalaya by Mir Izzet Ullah". In *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol.7.
- Workman, F.B. & W.H. 1900. *In the Ice World of the Himalaya*. London.
- Young, P. 1943. *Himalayan Holiday: A Trans-Himalayan Diary 1939*. London.
- Younghusband, F. 1896. *The Heart of a Continent*. London. (Repr. Hong Kong, 1984).