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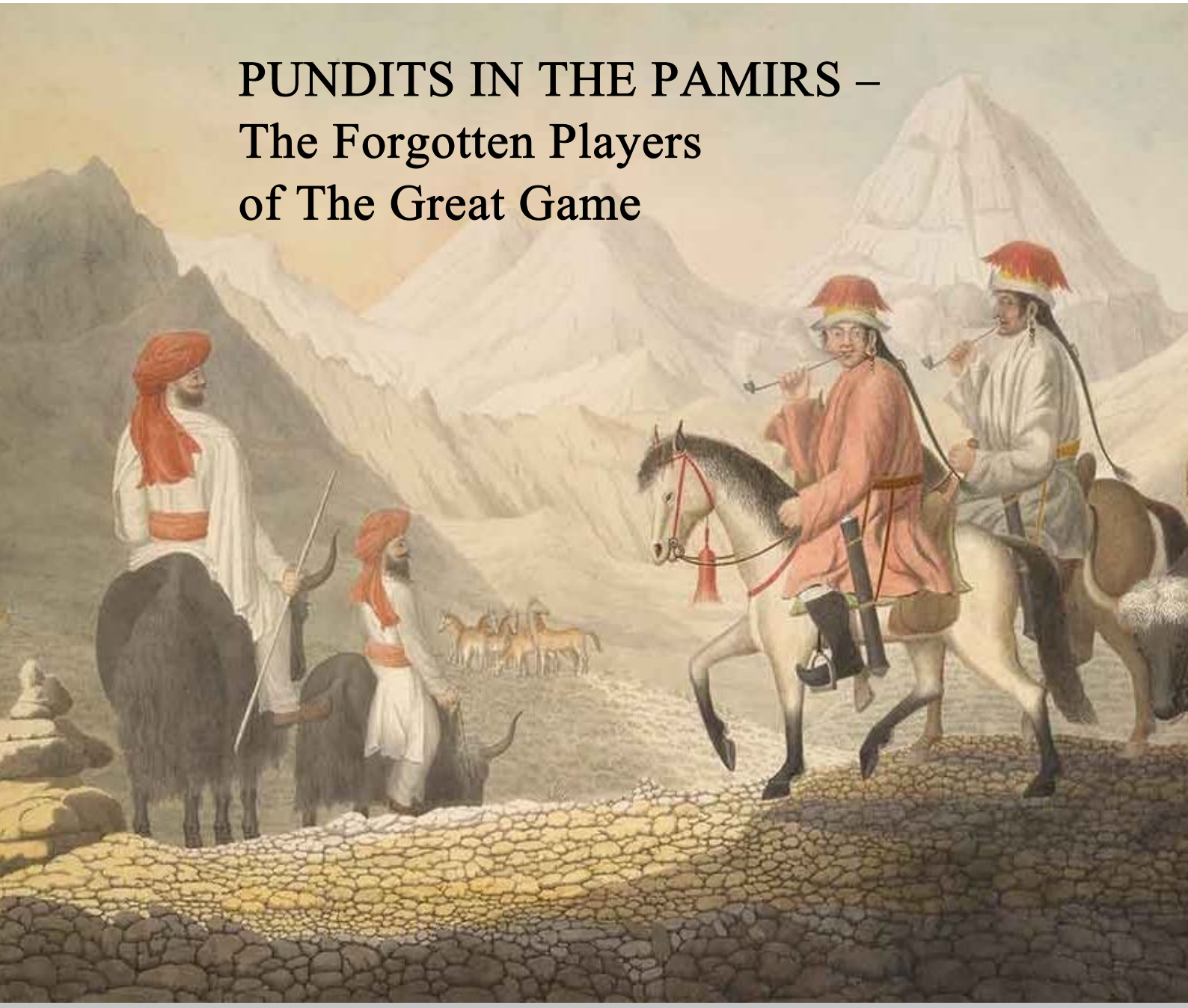
PUNDITS IN THE PAMIRS – The Forgotten Players of The Great Game



Robert Middleton

Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit's Research Paper #24

Pundits in the Pamirs – the forgotten players of The Great Game

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Abstract

By the mid-19th century, Russian expansion into Central Asia had become a source of concern to the British government; better information was needed about the neighbouring areas in order to evaluate the threat of Russian encroachment or even invasion of the sub-continent. In the general absence of law and order, these areas were dangerous for European travellers. The British were completing their Great Trigonometrical Survey of India for which native surveyors were being used, and decided to train and send some into Central Asia, disguised as holy men, to undertake preliminary reporting on the areas adjacent to India. They became known as the Pundits. This paper describes the missions of six Pundits in the Pamir region and summarises their reporting.

The pundits did their work conscientiously under dangerous and difficult circumstances and added to the sum of scientific knowledge of the Pamirs in the short period during which they were active; it was not always adequately appreciated by their colonial masters and was subjected to racial stereotyping; some, however, received awards from the Royal Geographic Society in Britain and the Société de Géographie in France. Given the full surveying subsequently undertaken shortly afterwards by Russian and British teams, the results of which were published and shared, the author questions whether the Pundits' work was worth the personal and political risks involved.

Keywords: Central Asia, the Pamirs, history, the Great Game, exploration.

About the author: Robert Middleton, MA, BSc. Econ., PhD, holds degrees from the Universities of Cambridge and London and has done postgraduate work at Stanford University (Rotary Foundation Fellowship) and the Sorbonne.

Throughout his long career, he has been involved in international relations, first in trade policy and subsequently in legal affairs and third-world development. In 1985 he was appointed Legal Advisor of the Aga Khan Foundation where he worked also as Coordinator of Tajikistan Programmes and Director of Donor Agency Relations. He initiated the Foundation's activities in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and was responsible for the major humanitarian relief programme mounted by the Foundation in the Pamirs at the time of the Tajik civil war. In 1999, he was made an honorary citizen of the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast in recognition of his services to the population during this period.

On his retirement from AKF in 2003, he created the prize-winning website www.pamirs.org and advised local NGOs in the Pamirs in a pro bono capacity on the implementation of projects aimed at promoting responsible tourism and preserving the cultural and archaeological heritage of the region. He has also worked on a number of projects with UCA, including a curriculum for sustainable tourism. He is co-author of *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs – a Companion and Guide*, the first international tourist guide to Tajikistan, published by Odyssey (2008 and 2012). He lives in the Canton of Vaud in Switzerland.

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Cover picture: *Hyder Young Hearsey: William Moorcroft and the artist, disguised as Indian Holy Men with two Chinese horsemen near Lake Manasarovar, Tibet, July 1812. (Sacred Mount Kailash in the background).*

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Preface

This paper follows and complements my Research Papers Nos. 1 and 2 for the UCA's Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit: The Great Game – Myth or Reality and The Russians in the Great Game.

It summarizes the reporting work of Indian native explorers of the Pamirs at a period of tension between the British and Russian Empires in the latter half of the 19th century. If, contemporaneously, the Russians were sending scientists – sometimes alone, most often as part of military expeditions – the British entrusted the first missions to native Indian explorers, working alone: the Pundits. Later British adventurers and explorers would draw on and confirm or correct the reporting of the Pundits.

I have been inspired by Derek Waller's *The Pundits – British Exploration of Tibet and Central Asia*, (University Press of Kentucky, 1990),[1] and am especially grateful to him for his generosity in providing me with copies of some of the original source material for his book.

Markus Hauser's superb 2016 map of the Pamirs[2] greatly facilitated the task of retracing the footsteps of the Pundits in the Pamirs. I am grateful to him for the map on the last page of this paper, showing their itineraries and that of John Wood.

In 2018, I donated all my research papers for *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs*, Odyssey 2011, to the UCA in Khorog, including the unpublished papers that Professor Waller shared with me. I must acknowledge the help of ChatGPT in sourcing some of the quotations in the text that follows from documents no longer in my possession. N.B. I am, nevertheless, the sole author of this paper!

Abbreviations

BSG	Bulletin de la Société de Géographie, Paris
GJ	Geographical Journal, Royal Geographical Society (RGS), London
GR	Geographical Review, RGS
GTS	The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India
IOLR	India Office Library and Records, British Library, London
JRGS	Journal of the RGS, London
PRGS	Proceedings of the RGS, London

1 https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt130j076
2 Currently out of print, but available from some online sellers.

Pundits in the Pamirs – the forgotten players of The Great Game

> Still more important than Wordsworth, or the eminent authors, Burke and Hare, was the art and science of mensuration. A boy who had passed his examination in these branches – for which, by the way, there were no cram-books – could, by merely marching over a country with a compass and a level and a straight eye, carry away a picture of that country which might be sold for large sums in coined silver. But as it was occasionally inexpedient to carry about measuring-chains a boy would do well to know the precise length of his own foot-pace, so that when he was deprived of what Hurree Chunder called adventitious aids he might still tread his distances. … Through the volleying drifts of English, Kim caught the general trend of the talk, and it interested him very much. Here was a new craft that a man could tuck away in his head and by the look of the large wide world unfolding itself before him, it seemed that the more a man knew the better for him.
>
> Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*

Context

Until the Russian conquests in the second half of the 19th century,[3] travel in Central Asia had been a very dangerous enterprise; with the exception of Russian merchants, only a few other Europeans had ventured there since Marco Polo. This small and somewhat improbable group included: an Embassy to Tamerlane from the Spanish court in 1403–1406, led by Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo;[4] a Turkish Admiral of the Egyptian fleet, Sidi Ali Reis (also known as Katib-i-Rumi), in 1553–56;[5] an intrepid English trader, Anthony Jenkinson, who got as far as Bukhara in 1558;[6] and several Jesuit missionaries in the 17th and early 18th centuries on their way to Tibet, one of whom, Benedict Goës, actually crossed the Pamirs in 1603–4.[7]

In the early 19th century, with the exception of John Wood's remarkable journey to the "Source of the Oxus" (1836–38),[8] past travellers' experiences were not encouraging for the European adventurer.

William Moorcroft, manager of the East India Company's stud in Bengal, had died near Bukhara in 1825 while on a mission to explore the Central Asian horse market;[9]

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3 In 1865, the Russians took Tashkent and, in 1867, General Konstantin Kaufman was instated there as Governor-General of the new province of Turkestan. By 1868, Bukhara, Khodjent and Samarkand were in the hands of the Russians. Kuldja (Yining), in Chinese territory, was occupied in 1871 (it was vacated in 1881, but the Russians obtained the right to establish a consulate there); Khiva fell to the Russians in May 1873 and Kokand was annexed in February 1876. In 1895, a permanent Russian presence was established in the Pamirs.

4 See *Embajada a Tamerlan*, Miraguano Ediciones, Madrid 1984.

5 Sidi Ali travelled through Afghanistan and crossed the Oxus to Kulob on his way to Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva. His detailed account of his remarkable travels can be accessed on http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/sidialireis (*Mirat ul-Memalik*, translated by A. Vambéry and published in London in 1899) and on https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/source/16csidi1.asp.

6 Jenkinson was the main agent of the Muscovy Company, the first major joint-stock English trading company, formed in 1555 by the navigator and explorer Sebastian Cabot and various London merchants.

7 See Sir Henry Yule, *Cathay and the Way Thither – Being a collection of Medieval Notices of China*, Hakluyt Society London 1916, Vol. IV, pp. 174–175 (Reprint by Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1998); C. Wessels, *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia (1603–1721)*. First published in 1924, The Hague (Reprint: Asian Educational Services AES, New Delhi 1992); *an Account of Tibet – The Travels of Ippolito Desideri of Pistoia S.J.*, 1712–1727, London 1937 (Reprint: AES, 2005); and https://www.academia.edu/6942690/_Jesuits_in_Tibet_JBE_review_.

8 *A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus By the Route of the Indus, Kabul, and Badakhshan, Performed Under the Sanction of the Supreme Government of India, in the Years 1836, 1837, and 1838*, John Murray, London 1841(https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_aiA-PAAAAYAAJ).

9 At the time, his death was attributed to local violence but was determined later to have been due to a fever. See Garry Alder, *Beyond Bokhara: The Life of William Moorcroft, Asian Explorer and Veterinary Surgeon, 1767–1825. Century*, 1985.

Pic. 1. Hyder Young Hearsey: William Moorcroft and the artist, disguised as Indian Holy Men with two Chinese horsemen near Lake Manasarovar, Tibet, July 1812. (Sacred Mount Kailash in the background).[10]

Adolph Schlagintweit, the German explorer and scientist, had been put to death as a spy in Kashgar in 1857;[11] and George Hayward had been murdered in Gilgit in 1870 on his attempt to reach the upper Oxus and explore the Pamirs – a crime that generated outrage in the British press and a famous poem by Henry Newbolt (1862–1938).[12]

Pic. 2. Adolph Schlagintweit, Mustagh-Pass in the Karakorum, August 1856. Alpines Museum, Munich.[13]

10 https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/6/66/William_Moorcroft_and_Hyder_Young_Hearsey.jpg

11 Born in 1829, Adolph Schlagintweit was the second son of a family of distinguished scholars and explorers. In 1854, on the recommendation of Alexander von Humboldt, three of the Schlagintweit brothers (Robert, Hermann and Adolph) were chosen by the East India Company to map parts of India and the Himalayas. (See *Results of a Scientific Mission to India and High Asia*, Leipzig, 1860–1866 and http://www.schlagintweit.de/engl/easien.htm – the exquisite illustrations by Adolph and Herrmann Schlagintweit can be found on this site and are also accessible, together with the maps, on http://dsr.nii.ac.jp/toyobunko/XII-4-2.) Adolph was the first European to visit Kashgar since Marco Polo, but, suspected of being a Chinese spy, was put to death by Vali Khan, ruler of Kashgar. His head was later recovered and brought by a Persian traveller to the British authorities in India, inspiring the closing scene in Rudyard Kipling's story *The Man Who Would Be King*.

12 Henry Rawlinson, "Discussion on the murder of Mr. Hayward", *PRGS*, 1870–1871 Vol. 15, pp.18–23 (https://www.scribd.com/document/829256304/George-Hayward-Discussion-Murder-1870). See also Alam Zeb Khan, *George Hayward: the Unfortunate Explorer*, 2026 (https://alamzebkhan2000.blogspot.com/2026/04/george-hayward-unfortunate-explorer.html).

13 https://www.alpenverein.de/museum/ausstellungen/rueckblick/ueber-den-himalaya-die-expedition-der-brueder-schlagintweit-nach-indien-und-zentralasien-1854-bis-1858

He Fell Among Thieves (Henry Newbolt)

'Ye have robb'd,' said he, 'ye have slaughter'd
and made end,
Take your ill-got plunder, and bury the dead:
What will ye more of your guest and sometime friend?'
'Blood for our blood,' they said.

He laugh'd: 'If one may settle the score for five,
I am ready; but let the reckoning stand till day:
I have loved the sunlight as dearly as any alive.'
'You shall die at dawn,' said they.

He flung his empty revolver down the slope,
He climb'd alone to the Eastward edge of the trees;
All night long in a dream untroubled of hope
He brooded, clasping his knees.

He did not hear the monotonous roar that fills
The ravine where the Yassîn river sullenly flows;
He did not see the starlight on the Laspur hills,
Or the far Afghan snows.

He saw the April noon on his books aglow,
The wistaria trailing in at the window wide;
He heard his father's voice from the terrace below
Calling him down to ride.

He saw the gray little church across the park,
The mounds that hid the loved and honour'd dead;
The Norman arch, the chancel softly dark,
The brasses black and red.

He saw the School Close, sunny and green,
The runner beside him, the stand by the parapet wall,
The distant tape, and the crowd roaring between,
His own name over all.

He saw the dark wainscot and timber'd roof,
The long tables, and the faces merry and keen;
The College Eight and their trainer dining aloof,
The Dons on the daïs serene.

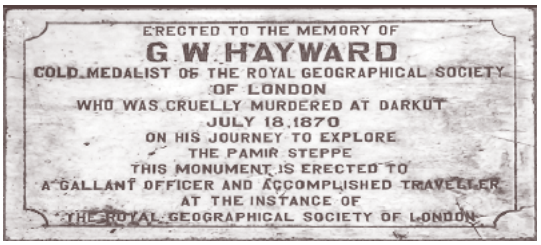
He watch'd the liner's stem ploughing the foam,
He felt her trembling speed and the thrash of her screw;
He heard the passengers' voices talking of home,
He saw the flag she flew.

And now it was dawn. He rose strong on his feet,
And strode to his ruin'd camp below the wood;
He drank the breath of the morning cool and sweet:
His murderers round him stood.

Light on the Laspur hills was broadening fast,
The blood-red snow-peaks chill'd to a dazzling white;
He turn'd, and saw the golden circle at last,
Cut by the Eastern height.

'O glorious Life, Who dwellest in earth and sun,
I have lived, I praise and adore Thee.'
A sword swept.
Over the pass the voices one by one
Faded, and the hill slept.

The self-proclaimed 'civilising mission' of the Europeans was not necessarily appreciated by the local population and, in the general absence of law and order, travellers were fair game for bandits. Even the French explorer Gabriel Bonvalot and his companions, at the end of the century, were reduced to banditry for survival in the Pamirs.[14]



Pic. 3. George Hayward's gravestone in Gilgit cemetery.

14 Gabriel Bonvalot, "Voyage dans l'Asie Centrale et au Pamir", *BSG,* 4e trimestre 1890, pp. 469–498 (https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb34424377d/date); "Aux Indes par terre et à travers le Pamir", Extrait de la *Revue des Deux Mondes*, 1 octobre 1888, pp. 600–631; *Du Caucase aux Indes à travers le Pamir*, Paris 1889; *De Paris au Tonkin à Travers le Tibet Inconnu*, Paris 1891. Guillaume Capus, *Le Toit du Monde* (*Pamir*), Hachette, Paris 1890; Robert Middleton/Huw Thomas, *Tajikistan and the High Pamirs*, Odyssey Books and Guides 2012, pp. 441–446.

Pic. 4. Albert Pépin: Gabriel Bonvalot and companions in the Pamirs, Illustration from *Du Caucase aux Indes à travers le Pamir*, 1889.

In addition, the British government discouraged travel in frontier areas of India where it was as yet unable to take retaliatory action against the local perpetrators of crimes against its citizens. At the same time, however, given perceived Russian ambitions in Central Asia and possible threats to India, the authorities wanted to extend their knowledge of the territories adjacent to India – and assess the risks of invasion or opportunities for conquest – by undertaking geographical surveys.

As British distrust of Russian intentions grew,[15] so did their need for more accurate information about those same frontier areas that were dangerous for Europeans to enter.

In 1871, the President of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir Henry Rawlinson, pointed out that:

> It was quite impossible to employ European surveyors to explore these countries, though one – Mr. [William] Johnson[16] – had successfully gone to Ilchi [Khotan] and come back, to the astonishment of everybody, with his head upon his shoulders.[17]

Pic. 5. Portrait of Alexander Burnes in native dress by Daniel Maclise; Frontispiece to *Travels into Bokhara*.[20]

The Great Trigonometrical Survey of India

Early in the 19th century, the British had begun a full survey of India: the 'Great Trigonometrical Survey' (GTS).[18] It was concluded in 1883, when the triangulation of most of the sub-continent had been completed. In 1774, a native officer had collected data on the territory between Bengal and the Deccan and, in 1812, the ill-fated Moorcroft was using Indians for surveying. By the 1830s – despite some official disapproval of the use of natives for such skilled work – Indians were being employed for the GTS. One, Mahommed Ali, travelled with Alexander Burnes to Bukhara in 1832.[19]

In November 1852, Thomas George Montgomerie was appointed to the GTS, and, in 1856, was put in charge of the Kashmir surveys. Under his leadership, there came into being a new class of native Indian surveyors, the "Pundits", immortalised in Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*.

15 See Robert Middleton, The Great Game – Myth or Reality; University of Central Asia, Bishkek, Cultural Heritage and Humanities Unit, Research Paper #1, 2019.

16 William Johnson, a surveyor for the GTS, made an unauthorised journey to Khotan in 1865. See William Johnson – "Report on His Journey to Ilchí, the Capital of Khotan, in Chinese Tartary", *JRGS*, Vol. 37 (1867), pp. 1–47.

17 *PRGS*, Vol. 15 No. 3 (1870–1871), p. 203.

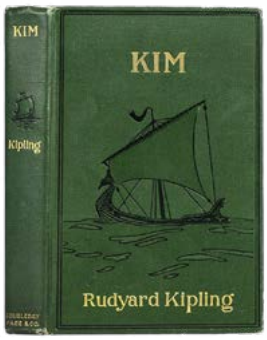
18 *Bluesci: Cambridge university science magazine*, 29 January 2011, "History: The Great Trigonometrical Survey" "«BlueSci» History: The Great Trigonometrical Survey"

19 Burnes, Alexander. "Travels into Bokhara. Being an account of a Journey from India to Cabool, Tartary and Persia. Also, narrative of a Voyage on the Indus from the Sea to Lahore". London, John Murray, 1835.

20 https://alchetron.com/Alexander-Burnes#alexander-burnes-bfda4d4f-db33-485f-80d8-e366c3d0be9-resize-750.jpeg

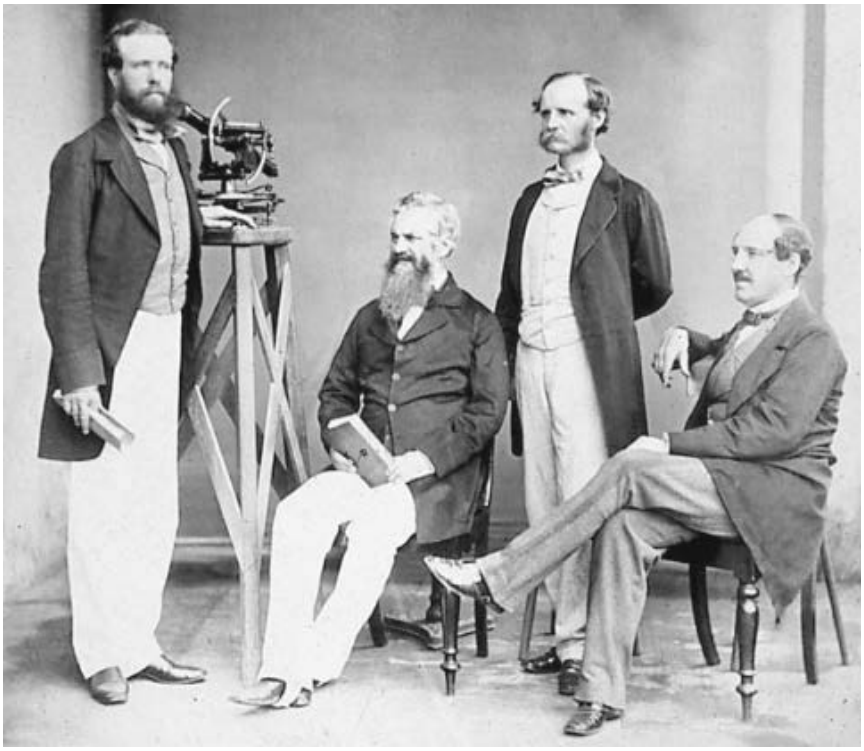
The failure of two British expeditions to Tibet in 1861 and 1862 overcame official scepticism and Montgomerie's proposals for training Indian surveyors were approved in 1863.

'Pundit' is the Hindi word for an educated person; the equivalent in Arabic (used for Muslim Indians) is 'Munshee', 'Moonshee' or 'Munshi'. *The Pundit* was the code-name given to one of the first native explorers, Nain Singh, who was originally a schoolteacher. His accomplishments were so remarkable that the whole group of around twenty native explorers became known as the Pundits.



Pic. 6. First edition of Kipling's *Kim*, published in 1901.[21]

Kapil Raj, in *Relocating Modern Science Circulation and the Construction of Knowledge in South Asia and Europe*, 1650–1900, evocatively imagines the work of a pundit.



Pic. 7. Left to right: Thomas George Montgomerie, Sir Andrew Scott Waugh (Surveyor-General of India from 1843 to 1861), James Thomas Walker (Superintendent of the Great Trigonometrical Survey from 1861 to 1883 and Surveyor-General of India from 1878 to 1883), and Sir Henry Edward Landor Thuillier (Surveyor-General of India from 1861 to 1878). Photograph about 1857 and attributed to William Glynn.[22]

21 https://www.raptisrarebooks.com/product/kim-rudyard-kipling-first-edition-rare-book-original-cloth/

22 British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections (Reproduced in Kapil Raj, op. cit., p. 184, Fig. 16 – https://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/19011/1/10.pdf). This photograph is almost certainly a composite of separate portraits taken at different times.

Pic. 8. GTS Survey party at work in the Himalayas.[23]

Pic. 9. Nain Singh and companions.[25]

On a warm spring day in May 1863, two men, a South Asian and a European, are walking endlessly up and down a sinuous mountain path in the Himalayan heights somewhere to the east of Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir. A pilgrim's staff in hand, the former leads the way, the latter closely follows meticulously counting and measuring his companion's paces: yes, his two thousand steps do indeed make a mile. Suddenly they stop, light a small oil stove and place a copper vessel upon it – to make some tea, one might think. But, as soon as the water begins to boil, the native produces a small boiling-point thermometer from the depths of his long woollen dress and plunges it into the pan. He watches it for a while and then whispers something to his fellow traveller. They start walking afresh. A few moments later, they stop again. This time the former lays down his staff and pulls out from under his dress a smoked

23 Frontispiece to the Survey of India's annual report for 1895–96, Calcutta 1897, (See https://allthatsinteresting.com/george-everest).
24 Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG PORTRAIT-230 https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84501743.item

> glass and produces, almost from nowhere – very like a magician – a tiny sextant which he holds above the glass and begins to observe the sun. An instant later, he mumbles a number to his companion who, in spite of his forbidding look, lets slip from behind his large beard the slightest hint of a satisfied smile. Then the Indian examines a compass that materializes mysteriously onto his palm. Next, seeking the shade of a rock, he pulls out another thermometer which he exposes for some minutes before squinting at it and muttering something to the European. As the sun sets, the two men make their way to their camp tent. But, as soon as night falls, they come out again and begin to observe the stars through the sextant. Day after day, night after night, they repeat the same gestures. On 12 June, the European returns to Srinagar, while his native companion joins a dark-blue-uniformed troop column making its way towards Leh, the capital of Ladakh.[25]

The Pundits' exploration of the Pamirs

In 1863, Montgomerie

> … at length succeeded in finding an intelligent Moonshee, named Mahomed-i-Hameed [also known as Abdul Hamid], willing to run the risk of carrying instruments to Yarkund, in Eastern Turkestan, to fix its position, besides surveying the route thither from the trigonometrical station in Ladakh. He was trained by Captain Montgomerie to take observations for latitude with a small sextant, to record the temperature of the air, and of boiling water, and to make a rough skeleton route-survey from point to point.[26]

For this purpose, he practised the GTS "measured step" (walking at precisely two thousand paces to the mile) and was given a specially made set of 100 prayer beads – as opposed to the 108 of Hindu-Buddhist tradition, or 99 of Muslim practice – every tenth one of which was larger than the others. By counting one bead for 100 paces, with each larger bead corresponding to 1,000, he could thus keep a mental note of the distances covered. He had, in addition, a pocket sextant, compasses, thermometers and watches. Subsequent pundits were given a Tibetan prayer-wheel, the interior of which could contain, instead of prayers, written notes and observations.

Pic. 10. Tibetan prayer wheel as drawn by Pundit Sarat Chandra Das.[29]

Regrettably, Mahomed-i-Hameed died on his return journey in 1864, but his papers were recovered and a detailed report was prepared by Montgomerie and submitted to the Royal Geographical Society (RGS).[27] When the Society met in May 1866 to hear the report of the Munshee's work, Sir Henry Rawlinson, the President, described it as "a magnificent feat" and commented that "if Captain Montgomerie's Moonshee had lived he would have been a very deserving object for a similar recognition" to the award of "a watch of the value of 25 guineas" made by the Society that day to another native explorer for his journey across the Pamirs in 1860.[28]

25 Kapil Raj, op. cit., pp.181–182 (https://ndl.ethernet.edu.et/bitstream/123456789/19011/1/10.pdf).
26 T. G. Montgomerie, 'On the Geographical Position of Yarkund and Other Places in Central Asia', *PRGS*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1865–1866, pp. 162–165 (https://archive.org/details/dli.pahar.0606/page/156/mode/2up).
27 Montgomerie, op. cit.
28 In addition to his service to the British Empire in the course of the Afghan War, Rawlinson was renowned for deciphering the cuneiform Achaemenid royal inscription on a cliff in western Iran, established by Darius the Great (r. 522–486 BC). See https://www.britannica.com/biography/Henry-Creswicke-Rawlinson.
29 Kapil Raj, op. cit., p. 195, Fig. 21 (Source: Royal Geographical Society).

Abdul Mejid

Abdul Mejid, the recipient of the watch, was the first to provide a written account of a journey across the Pamirs from south to north.[30] Prior to Abdul Mejid's mission, another native, Mahomed Amin, who had served as the guide of Adolph Schlagintweit, also claimed to have direct knowledge of several routes across the Pamirs, but his credibility was in doubt and he left no substantiated written record.[31]

Montgomerie reported the pundits' explorations to the RGS – often, for reasons of secrecy, without revealing their real names – and received the Society's gold medal in 1865 for his (and their) work. Abdul Mejid's mission, however, was a diplomatic one, on the instructions of the authorities in Punjab and not as part of Montgomerie's survey. It was undertaken in great secrecy and his award from the RGS neither cited him by name nor mentioned the purpose of his mission or his itinerary. The British had been trying for some time to establish friendly relations with the Khan of Kokand in the hope that he might request assistance against anticipated Russian encroachment. An envoy from Kokand had delivered a letter of goodwill from the Khan to the British authorities in Peshawar and Abdul Mejid was instructed to accompany the envoy on his return journey with presents for the Khan and with the aim of assessing the degree of Russian influence in Kokand.

Abdul Mejid was related by marriage to the Amir Dost Mohamed[32] and although the British were accordingly somewhat concerned at the possibility of intrigue, he had several advantages for his mission: his father had been a distinguished religious leader in Kabul, and his Islamic credentials were therefore impeccable; and, moreover, he was actively engaged in trading and had experience of travel in difficult conditions.

He left Peshawar for Kabul on 28 September 1860 and reached Kokand via Kunduz, Badakhshan and the Pamirs on 17 December. After first following Wood's itinerary along the Wakhan ("nine difficult marches"), he struck north across the Khargush pass and travelled past Sasik Kul, Chatyr Tash, Kara Su, Murghab, Akbaital, Kara Kul and Kizyl Art to the Alai valley.[33] This was quite a physical achievement, since his itinerary in the Pamirs to the Alai valley must have covered nearly 500 kilometres:

> From Lungur Wakhan [Langar], fourteen weary days were occupied in crossing the steppe. The marches were long, depending on uncertain supplies of grain and water, which sometimes wholly failed. Food for man and beast had to be carried with the party, for not a trace of human habitation is to be met within these inhospitable wilds.[34]

Pic. 11. Akbaital (2006).

30 *Proceedings of the Government of India*, Foreign Department Political, 1861, P/204/55, pp. 91–101; and 'Report of a Journey to Kokan' in *Records of the Government of India*, Foreign Department, No. 39, Calcutta 1863. (India Office Library and Records, ref. IOR V/23/7).

31 See 'Route from Jellalabad to Yarkand Through Chitral, Badakhshan and Pamir Steppe, Given by Mohamed Amin of Yarkand, with Remarks by G. S. W. Hayward,' *PRGS*, Vol. 13, No. 2, (1868–1869), pp. 122–130 (https://archive.org/details/jstor-1799400/page/n1/mode/2up).

32 Both were married to daughters of Nazir Khyroola, a merchant of Bukhara, who had interceded on behalf of Stoddart and Conolly after they were arrested by the Emir of Bukhara and was thus in favour with the British. See https://empiretoempire.wordpress.com/2026/08/10/the-sorry-saga-of-charles-stoddart-and-arthur-conolly/

33 From Sasik Kul, almost the exact route of the present-day Pamir Highway.

34 'Report of a Journey to Kokan', op. cit., section 15.

Pic. 12. Pre-Islamic petroglyphs above Langar
in the Wakhan. Photo by Vatani Alidodov.

Pic. 13. Pamir river, near Khargush (2000).

Pic. 14. Sasik-kul (2000).

Pic. 15. Chatyr Tash (2006).

Pic. 16. Mustagh Ata (7’546m) from Murghab (2003).

Pic. 17. Karakul (1998).

Pic. 18. Kyzyl Art (1996).

Pic. 19. Alai valley (1998).

He observed the incidence of altitude sickness in his party, which was thought by the locals to be caused by a "noxious wind" which prevails at certain seasons called *Dummuk* and he was warned never to sleep lying down.

Malla-Khan, the ruler of Kokand, was far too canny to enter into formal relations with the British without any guarantee of support against the Russians – and the British were, of course, unwilling (and probably unable) to make any such commitments. Indeed, Abdul Mejid had strict instructions not to say or do anything that might give the impression that his mission was anything other than one of courtesy.[35]

35 Postnikov, A. V. *Схватка на «Крыше Мире» – Политики, разведчики и географы в борьбе за Памир в XIX веке* (Struggle on the 'Roof of the World': Politicians, spies and geographers in the contest for the Pamirs in the 19th century), Moscow, 2001, p. 74.

Abdul Mejid left Kokand on 31 January 1861 and reached Peshawar on 26 June via Kolab and Kabul. He provided a detailed account of his route but had not undertaken any surveying and the information he brought back was more anecdotal than scientific. Nevertheless, his safe passage and the detailed account of his route led Montgomerie to expand the use of native Indian pundits for the Great Trigonometrical Survey.

The Mirza

In 1867, Mirza Shuja (sometimes Sudja or Sajjad), known as 'the Mirza', was sent to survey the route from Peshawar to Badakhshan through Chitral, the shortest way to the Pamirs, and the upper Oxus route to Kashgar and Yarkand.[36] Although he left Peshawar in the autumn, early snow prevented him from taking the Chitral route and, after four unsuccessful attempts to cross the Hindu Kush, he was forced to travel via Kandahar and Kabul, where he arrived at the end of June 1868. Further delayed by unrest in Kabul, he was only able to start for Badakhshan in October.

He left Faizabad, the capital of Badakhshan, on 24 December 1868, reached Ishkashim, where the Panj (Oxus) makes a right-angle turn north, in the first week of January 1869, and continued east up the Wakhan to Kala-i-Panj and "twelve miserable days" from there through the Little Pamir to Tashkurgan, noting that the inhabitants of the Wakhan, then as now, are Ismailis. His party also suffered from altitude sickness and he suggested a remedy that is valid for today's travellers in the Pamirs:

> Some of the men became nearly insensible, but soon got over it when they had eaten a little dried fruit and sugar, which the Mirza served out as soon as he saw the state of affairs.[37]

Pic. 20. Photograph by P. P. Pavlov, "Река Пыандж, Гиндукуш и замок Калаи-Пыандж в Вахане" (*River Pyanj, Hindukush and castle Kala-i-Pyandj in the Wahan*); Plate IX in Bobrinsky, A. A. *Горцы верхов'ыев Пянджа (ваханцы и ишкашимцы)* (Highlanders of the upper Pyandj (Wakhan and Ishkashim). Moscow, 1908.

36 'Report of the Mirza's Exploration of the Route from Caubul to Kashgar'; *PRGS*, Vol. 15 No. 3, (1870–1871), pp. 181–204; Major T. Montgomerie, *Report on the Trans-Himalayan Explorations in Connection with the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India during 1869,* Cambridge University Library, Mayo Papers, MS Add. 7490/48/14; and *JRGS* 41, 1871, pp. 132–93. Another pundit, Munphool, was in Badakhshan in 1867, but his report (*JRGS*, Vol. 42, 1872, pp. 440–448) dealt mainly with the physical resources of the region, and gives general information on its history, geography and political situation but nothing about his route or the circumstances of his travel: since he does not appear to have been trained in surveying, the primary purpose of his journey was probably private.

37 Another local remedy for altitude sickness, used frequently by drivers on the Pamir Highway, is 'kurut', a hard ball of cheese, available in most Central Asian markets.

Pic. 21. Chakmaktyn Kul, photograph by Sir Aurel Stein.[38]

Stopping near the Pamir-Kul (Chakmaktyn Kul) in the Little Pamir, the Mirza commented, in words curiously reminiscent of the Taoist legend,[39] that the scene "was the most desolate he ever saw – not a sign of man, beast or bird, the whole country being covered with a mantle of snow" (cf. Sir Aurel Stein's photograph from his exploration in Central Asia in 1906–1908 above).

In Sarikol, he noted that the Tajiks had been driven from the region by the Atalik Ghazi, Yakub Khan,[40] because of their presumed allegiance to his predecessor, and their place taken by Kyrgyz "who seemed to like the change", probably because the climate was better than on the steppe.

Although he did not cross the Pamir steppe, the Mirza brought back the first detailed reports, including a route survey, of the area to the south (Ishkashim, Sarikol and Tagdumbash) through which he travelled, corroborating the data collected earlier by Wood.[41] The following year, T. Douglas Forsyth, Robert Shaw, George Hayward and the pundits in their mission provided further information on the route through Tashkurgan to Kashgar.

Faiz Buksh

Faiz Buksh (sometimes Baksh, also known as Ghulam Rabbani) was assigned to the 1870 Forsyth mission to Yarkand.[42] He had already travelled extensively in Central Asia and had been in Badakhshan in 1867, although he was not trained as a surveyor until just before the mission. On his way to join it, he undertook surveys in Badakhshan, the Wakhan and Sarikol and described the two alternative routes (Little Pamir and Great Pamir) from the Wakhan to Aktash and Tashkurgan. Taking the latter route, he passed Zorkul and noted that the whole area from the Wakhan to Sarikol was uninhabited, although the evidence of place names and graveyards indicated that the Kyrgyz were once there in significant numbers.

38 *Ruins of desert Cathay : personal narrative of explorations in Central Asia and westernmost China*, Vol.1; Macmillan, London 1912, p. 78.

39 "… it does not breed any species of bird or beast, fish or insect, grass or tree. The country is flat in all directions, with high ranges all around it; and right in the middle is a mountain named Urn Peak, shaped like a pot with a bracelet, which is named the Cave of Plenty. Waters bubble out of it, named the Divine Spring, which smell sweeter than orchids and spices, taste sweeter than wine and musk. Four streams divide from the one source, flow down the mountain and irrigate every corner of the country." *The Book of Lieh-tzu: a Taoist Classic* Trans. A. C. Graham, (Columbia University Press, New York 1990), pp. 102–103.

40 Muhammad Yakub Beg (c. 1820–30 May 1877), later known as Yakub Padishah, was the Kokandi ruler of Yettishar (Kashgaria), a state he established in Xinjiang, from 1865 to 1877.

41 For the Mirza's report, see Major T. Montgomerie, *Report on the Trans-Himalayan Explorations,* op. cit., Add 7490 p. LIII – also *JRGS* 41, 1871, 132–93.

42 See 'Journey from Peshawar to Kashgar and Yarkand in Eastern Turkestan, or Little Bokhara, through Afghanistan, Balkh, Badakhshan, Wakhan, Pamir and Sarkol', *JRGS*, 42 (1872) 448–73. Another pundit, Ibrahim Khan, also joined the mission, travelling from Srinagar through Gilgit and Yasin to the Little Pamir, and from there to Tashkurgan, but his report is also somewhat uninformative. ('Route of Ibrahim Khan from Kashmir Through Yassin to Yarkand in 1870', *PRGS*, Vol. 15, No. 5 (1870–71) pp. 387–392.)

Pic. 22. Aktash, with Kyrgyz tomb (2000).

He gave a detailed account of altitude sickness, and noted that it was called 'tunk' by the people of Badakhshan, and 'ais' by the Turkic speakers.

> The liver and stomach become irritated. The travellers get headache and blood flows from the nose. In the face of men of weak constitutions, the face as well as the hands and feet become swollen. The greater the cold, the more marked are those affections. The people of Badakhshan and Wakhan use acid, dry apricots, and plums to check those affections. At night, if the head of a man should not be two feet higher than the ground inclining towards his feet, respiration is checked in sleep.

The Havildar

Hyder Shah, known by his code name 'the Havildar' was sent on two surveying missions to the Pamirs, to complete the unexplored part of the Mirza's planned route, namely the approach to the Pamirs through Chitral, and to continue further down the Oxus and explore the territory to the east and north of the river. In order to have the time and freedom to make his observations, the Havildar was to pretend to be illiterate and poorly educated, and a corporal from the Indian Sappers was to behave as though he were the head of the caravan.

Leaving Peshawar in August 1870, earlier in the year than the Mirza, the Havildar reached Chitral on 31 August, where, on 4 September, he had a "very remarkable interview" with Mir Wali, the headman of Yasin (west of Gilgit, close to the Darkot pass) who was responsible for the murder of George Hayward. Mir Wali gave the Havildar the following account:

> I was in no way inclined to quarrel with Hayward sahib, for I had seen him on a former occasion while he was travelling through our country, when we interchanged civilities and presents, and parted good friends; but on this latter occasion of his travelling through the country he was forcibly pressing coolies and other people to carry his baggage from stage to stage on his way to Badakshan, besides taking supplies of food for his followers from the villagers by force, and several complaints from the zemindars [local leaders and tax collectors] reached me to this effect. On Hayward sahib coming up to the village where I was, I remonstrated with him and advised him not to act as he was acting towards

> the people, whereupon the sahib turned round on me and abused me, telling me that this country did not belong to us, but to the English, and altogether his attitude on the occasion was very violent, so much so that I feared his using personal violence to myself, and in consequence I kept quiet. The sahib encamped for that night near the place I was, but, towards morning, I sent some sixty men to a place a little distance ahead, called Oshgoom, with orders to wait in ambush for the sahib and his party, and on their way thence to fall upon them and kill them – which they did, killing Hayward sahib and seven of his servants.[43]

Pic. 23. The Havildar (left) with assistant.[45]

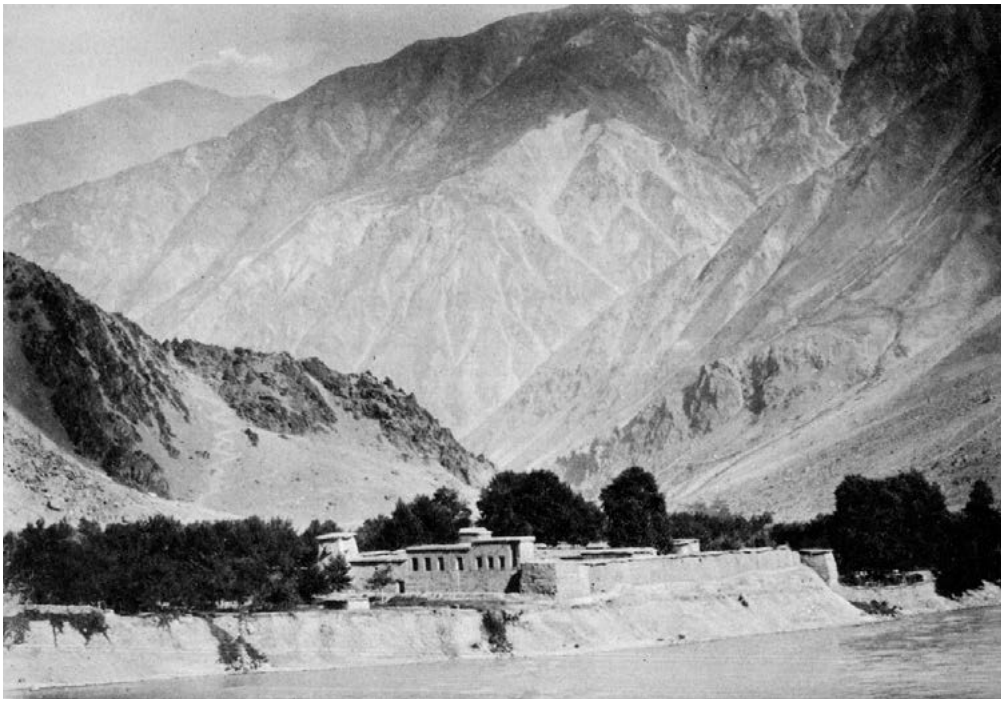
The Havildar further notes that the people of Chitral were convinced that Hayward was murdered on the orders of Aman-ul-Mulk,[44] the chief of Chitral. Although obviously self-serving, Mir Wali's explanations, if taken at face value, while not in any way excusing the crime, put it in a very different light from that of Newbolt's poem quoted above, which contrasts English 'heroism' with native 'barbarism'.

The Havildar reached Badakhshan but was unable to continue to the Oxus. In 1869, the Amir of Afghanistan, Sher Ali, had deposed the Mir of Badakhshan, Jehander Shah, an ally of the future Amir of Afghanistan, Abdul Rahman, then in Bukhara under the protection of Russia. The new Mir, Mahmood Shah, had forbidden travellers to go beyond Faizabad in order to prevent communication between Abdul Rahman and his supporters in Kabul. Mahmood Shah was not popular and the Havildar noted that his predecessor had maintained the independence of Badakhshan and had not paid tribute to Kabul – a fact of some significance for later disputes about whether Badakhshan recognised the suzerainty of the Amir of Afghanistan or was an independent territory.

Pic. 24. Aman-ul-Mulk.[46]

The Havildar was obliged to return and reached Peshawar on 13 December, bringing with him, however, a survey of a hitherto unmapped route covering 286 miles through Chitral, accounting for "the geography of about 13,000 square miles of this *terra incognita.*" There were now "but two gaps – the first between Chitral and the Mirza's bearing from the edge of the Pamir steppe … ; and the 2nd gap between Chitral and Chigur Serai [Asadabad, Konar province, Afghanistan] …".[47]

43 'A Havildar's Journey through Chitral to Faizabad in 1870', *JRGS*, Vol. 42 (1872), pp. 184–185.
44 https://grokipedia.com/page/aman_ul_mulk
45 Bibliothèque nationale de France, département Société de Géographie, SG PORTRAIT-98: https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8450425n
46 https://khowari.com/?page_id=1900
47 *JRGS*, Vol. 42 (1872), p. 190.



Pic. 25. Vladimir I. Lipsky, "Столица Дарваза Калай-хумъ на р. Пянджъ"
(The capital of Darwaz, Kalai-Khum, on the River Panj). photograph taken c. 1899;
reproduced in *Gornaya Bukhara*, published 1902–1905.

Despite doubts about his honesty and accuracy arising from a mission the Havildar claimed to have made through Balkh to Bukhara shortly after his return, Montgomerie sent him on another survey to the Pamirs in 1873.[48] After reaching Faizabad in November, he delayed the start of his survey of the Oxus north of Ishkashim until April of the following year, claiming plausibly that the roads to the Oxus were blocked by snow (although Trotter, Montgomerie's successor, was sceptical about this excuse). He crossed the Oxus at Samti (due south of the town of Kulob), followed the Yah-su river north and crossed the mountains to enter Darwaz at Saghirdasht. He reached the Oxus again at Kala-i-Khum in July and was able to survey upstream as far as the entrance to the Yazgulam valley, before being turned back by the local authorities.[49]

In Darwaz, he noted that the women go about unveiled and that the inhabitants,

> Sunni Mahomedans, are religious, and very regular in their devotions. They are a quiet hospitable race. They are, most of them, able to read and recite the Koran, and there are a great many Mullahs or religious instructors.

The Mirza and Faiz Buksh had already provided detailed survey information from Ishkashim up to Lake Zorkul and beyond, and the Havildar had been instructed to fill the gap downstream between Ishkashim and Yazgulam, the point where he had been forced to turn back. He determined to make one more attempt to visit Shughnan, this time by returning to Faizabad and travelling from there to Ishkashim. Although he reached Ishkashim in mid-October 1874 without incident, he was able to survey only thirty-five miles downstream before he was stopped and turned back by the guards

48 For the Havildar's second trip to Badakhshan, see: Captain Henry Trotter, 'The Havildar's Journey from Badakhshan to Kolab, Darwaz, and Kubodian' in *Report on Trans-Himalayan Exploration by Employees of the GTS of India during 1873-74-75*, op. cit., pp. 4–20; also Trotter's note in *GJ*, Vol. 48 No. 3, 1916, p. 229.

49 Derek Waller, *The Pundits – British Exploration of Tibet & Central Asia*, University Press of Kentucky, 1990, p. 92.

of the King of Shughnan. There were civil disturbances on the Badakhshan side and the King, probably fearing for the stability of his own territory, allowed no one to enter Shughnan without a letter from the Governor of Turkestan. Giving up in despair, the Havildar returned to Kabul via Kulob and Balkh.

He did not know it, but another pundit had arrived in Ishkashim in April on the exact day when he had crossed from Samti to the right bank of the Oxus en route for Kala-i-Khum; this pundit had already almost completed a survey of the unexplored 'gap' downstream.

The Munshi

In 1873, the Superintendent of the GTS, Colonel Walker, learned by chance that Forsyth was planning a second mission to Kashgar, and suggested that Trotter (who had just succeeded Montgomerie as head of the Kashmir survey) should join it. Abdul Subhan, known as 'the Munshi', a pundit in the Gwalior survey team, was attached to the mission as Trotter's assistant. Recognising his abilities, Trotter detached him at several points on the mission to undertake independent surveys.

On 21 March 1874, on the return journey from Kashgar, Forsyth sent a team from Yangi Hissar to undertake exploration of the Pamirs.[50] This team, under the leadership of Colonel T. E. Gordon, included, in addition to Trotter, Captain John Biddulph, Dr. Ferdinand Stoliczka, the Munshi and Kishen Singh, another pundit. En route for the Wakhan, they learned that the Afghan Amir had refused them permission to continue beyond Kala-i-Panj, the main fortress of the Wakhan,[51] to Badakhshan and Kabul, fearing that their real objective was to seize and carry off Mir Wali Khan, the alleged murderer of George Hayward, who was then at Kala-i Panj.[52]

The Munshi was therefore instructed to continue alone to Ishkashim and to survey the Oxus down river from there. With the exception of Biddulph, who continued to explore the Little Pamir up to the Baroghil Pass, the rest of the team headed for Lake Zorkul and the Great Pamir. Biddulph rejoined the team in Aktash.[53] Trotter was able to determine definitively, with the help of the observations of Kishen Singh, who made a detour to the lake on the return journey to Zorkul, that the Little Pamir lake (Chakmaktyn Kul) flows east into the Aksu and is not a (or the) source of the Oxus.

Trotter equipped the Munshi with the usual instruments and impressed on him the special importance of getting a survey – "however rough" – of the Oxus below Ishkashim.[54] The Munshi set off on 29 April, and made a first stop in Khandut, on the left bank, where he noticed, on the other side of the river,

> a fort called 'Maichun' [Yamchun], which I visited. Facing the river are stone walls rising successively one above the other, there being a distance of about 200 paces between each pair of walls. These were made of rough stone and lime. A stone road still in preservation leads to the upper fort from the bank of the river. The lower wall was entirely in ruins, but all the others are in good preservation. Within the fort is a large piece of level ground

50 'On the Geographical Results of the Mission to Kashgar, under Sir T. Douglas Forsyth in 1873-74', *JRGS*, Vol. 48 (1878), pp. 210–217.

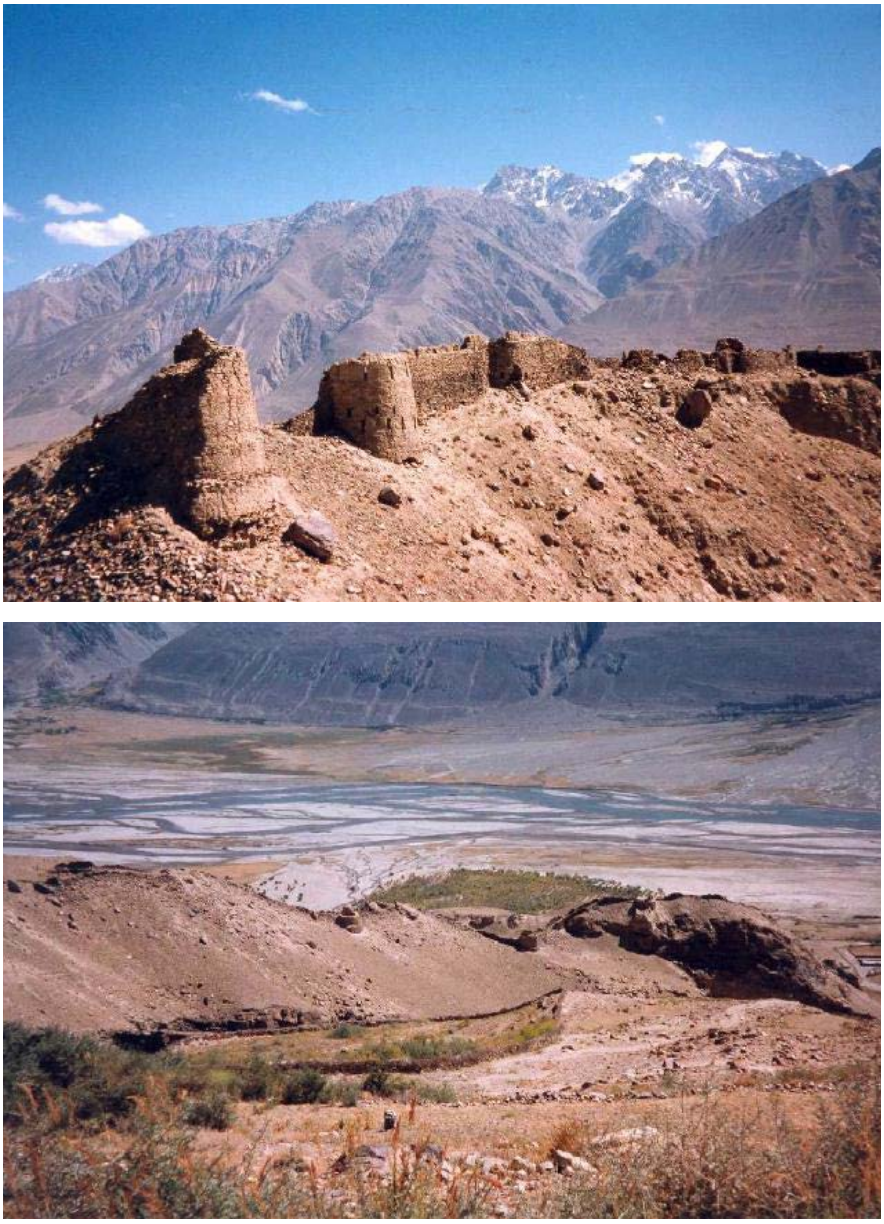
51 According to Trotter, the name Kala-i Panj comes from the presence of a stone there bearing the imprint of the hand ("panjah") of Hazrat Ali, sacred to the Ismailis. Gordon noted that there were in fact five forts on the site and explained the name by reference to the Farsi word *panj* meaning five. A simpler explanation is that it is the main fortress on the Panj river.

52 Gordon, *The Roof of the World*, op. cit., p. 142.

53 Waller, op. cit., p. 158.

54 'Narrative of Munshi Abdul Subhan's Journey from Panjeh to Shighnan and Roshan with a short account of his return to India via Kabul' in *Political and Secret Letters and Enclosures received from India,* Vol. 4, filed with No. 22 (India, 21 June 1875), 393–422, India Office Library and Records, ref. L/P+S/7/4.

about 75 paces wide by 150 long, and oval-shaped, originally containing houses of which no vestige remains. … I made enquiries and was told that this fort belonged to the *Zardushtis* or *Atash-parast* (fire-worshippers) or *Parsees* (Farsi) who were said to have ruled the country eight hundred years previously. There exist two other sets of remains of their people. One is a zanguebar or temple near Hissar, and the other at Kahkaha in the Sad Ishtrak …. the residence of the ruler of the Zardushtis, and bears signs of having been better built than the other remains I saw. It consisted of a single stone building of stone and lime, and is close to the river on its right bank.[55]



Pic. 26. Fortress in Yamchun (Zamr-i Atish Parast). Upper photo: Upper ramparts; lower photo: Lower section, with a view of the Wakhan and the Panj River (2000).

55 'Narrative of Munshi Abdul Subhan's Journey from Panjeh to Shighnan and Roshan' op. cit. IOR/L/PS/7/4, p. 407 and Henry Trotter, *Account of the Survey Operations in East Turkestan – Extracted from the volume of Reports submitted to the Government of India by Sir Douglas Forsyth, C. B., K.C.S.I., in charge of the mission* (https://turkistanilibrary.com/sites/default/files/account-of-survey-trotrich-mission-kasghar.pdf).

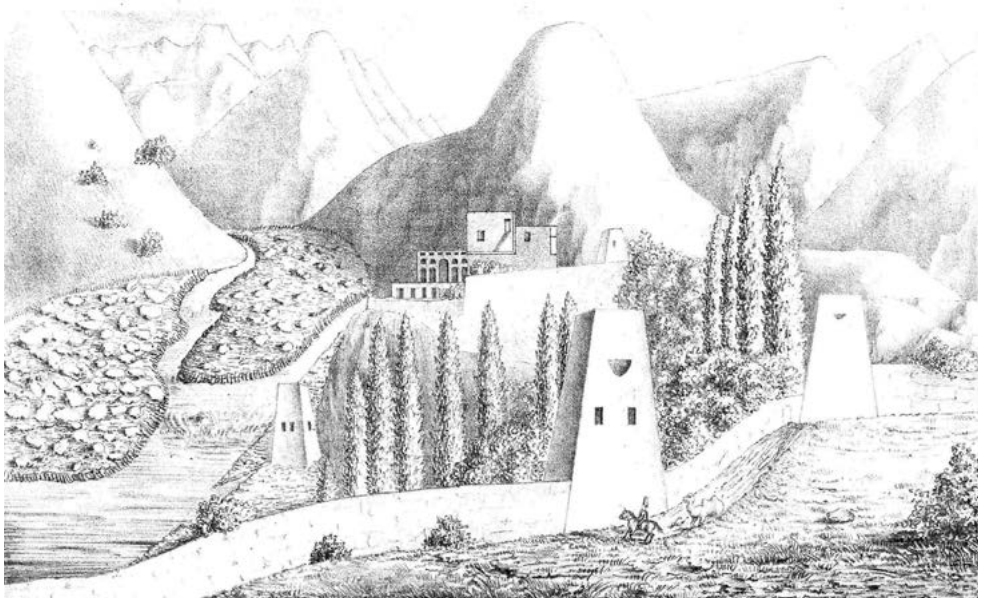
Pic. 27. Ruins of Kahkaha fortress (2000).

The ruins of two other spectacularly located contemporaneous fortresses that were not noted by the Munshi can still be seen in the Wakhan today.[56]

Pic. 28. Ratm, above Langar (2000).

Pic. 29. Vishimkala, above Vrang (2000).

56 I assume they were not recorded by the Munshi because they were not visible from the valley floor.



Pic. 30. Kala-i-Bar-Panja.[57]

In Gharan, downstream from Ishkashim, where the famous ruby (spinel) mines are located, the Munshi noted that several villages were deserted and that most inhabitants had migrated to escape the oppression of successive Mirs of Badakhshan. The mines were still a substantial source of income for the Mir; the Munshi also noted that people were panning for gold in the Garm Chashma stream that joins the Oxus at Anderob.

A little way north from there the path went along a precipice and then into the State of Shughnan through a narrow tunnel supposedly built 300 years previously, called Kuguz Parin, that the Shughnis described as the most effective safeguard of their territory. He estimated that the chief town, Kala-i Bar Panja – the name of which is also related to the presence of a stone similar to that at Kala-i Panj – had some 1500 houses and that Shughnan was sometimes called 'Zuján', or two-lived, because the climate was reputedly so good that people had two lives. The Munshi reported that the road to Kashgar up the Ghunt valley "is said to be a much easier road than that by Tashkurgan."[58]

The Munshi reached Vomar on 11 May. He was received cordially by the King of Shughnan, who was on a visit there, at a private dinner where he was offered local wine,[59] and allowed to visit the *Fatila Sang* (wick-stone) that was known to him from a book on the region[60] as one of "the two sights of Badakhshan." It was "a sort of fibrous stone which can be twisted into the shape of a wick, and when saturated with oil will burn almost forever."[61] He also witnessed a game of polo – locally known as 'Chaugan-Bazi' – that was similar to that played in Ladakh.

57 Albert Regel, in *Gartenflora: Allgemeine Monatsschrift für deutsche, russische und schweizerische Garten- und Blumenkunde*, 33. Jahrgang (1884), Tafel 1148, between pp. 88–89, Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1884. (https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/132592#page/110/mode/1up). The editor of Gartenflora was Albert Regel's father, director of the Russian Imperial Botanical Garden in St. Petersburg. Also in Hermann Roskoschny, *Afghanistan und seine Nachbarländer* (Leipzig: Gressner & Schramm, 1885–1886), digitized by the Library of Congress/World Digital Library.

58 *cf.* Middleton/Thomas, op. cit. p. 269. I postulated that the Ghunt valley itinerary should be considered as one of the 'Silk roads'.

59 The Munshi reported that the local inhabitants drink "very freely of a strong red wine somewhat like curaçoa [sic], large quantities of which are manufactured in the country from cherries." Trotter adds that "fondness for wine is a failing very prevalent among the Shia or unorthodox Mahometans of Central Asia."

60 Identified by Trotter as the *Sir* [probably *Sair/Sayr*; unidentified work], by Moulvi Imama Afzul Khorassani.

61 *Fatila Sang* is probably Persian *Sang-i Fatīla* ("wick stone"). The term may refer to asbestos, whose fibres were traditionally used for incombustible lamp wicks, as described by al-Bīrūnī in the *Kitāb al-Jamāhir fī Ma'rifat al-Jawāhir*.

The Munshi noted that the King "only keeps one wife, and no mistresses, and is very much loved by his people," adding almost as an afterthought that "the women of Shighnan are very beautiful." The King refused to sell any of his subjects as slaves or to give any as tribute to Badakhshan, paying with horses instead. He confided in the Munshi that he was concerned about the security of his kingdom now that the Anglo-Russian frontier agreement had allocated the left bank to Afghanistan and expected no help from Kabul if he ever had a conflict with his neighbours in Darwaz or Kolab.

> He thought his best policy under those circumstances would be to surrender to Kabul those few villages he possessed on the left bank of the river, and then throw himself into the arms of Russia and Bokhara, by which means he would hope to secure himself in possession of his present territories on the right bank of the river.

His ancestor, "Shah-i-Khamosh" was reputed to have come originally from Persia some 500–700 years earlier, when he converted the people to Ismailism and conquered Kahkaha, the Governor of Shughnan and Rushan, under the Zoroastrians whose seat was then in Balkh. He is interred in Bar Panjah.

Laden with presents from the king for his British employers, the Munshi prepared to return to Wakhan on 15 May without filling the gap in knowledge of the Oxus. Since his declared mission was to bring presents and letters to the King, we have to assume that he did not feel it would be appropriate to request permission to travel further downstream, as this might have raised suspicions about his real intentions.

He provided, however, much new information about the course of the river as well as confirmation that Gharan, Shughnan and Rushan extended to both sides of the river and were direct or indirect tributaries of the Mir of Badakhshan who, at that time professed allegiance to the Amir of Afghanistan – this was an important issue in determining the extent of Afghan territory when final borders were fixed a few years later. He was offered an opportunity to travel up the Bartang to Kashgar but concluded that his orders did not permit this. He would have liked to reach the Wakhan through the Shokhdara and Djavshangoz, but it was already too late in the year and the road was closed by snow.

The Munshi is an informative and engaging narrator, not as dry and matter-of-fact as most of his fellow pundits and it is a pity that he was unable to pursue either of these alternatives as we would otherwise have had an additional lively narrative. The combined work of the Havildar and the Munshi completed the survey of the course of the Oxus with the exception of the section between Vomar and Yazgulam, corresponding to about 70 km of its course. It was not until 1881 that this gap was filled by Mukhtar Shah.

M-S-

Mukhtar Shah – known only as M- S- in the official documents – was a holy man from Kashmir. In 1878, as he was about to start on a journey to Kolab, his friend Abdul Subhan, "the Munshi", put him in touch with the Superintendent of the GTS, James Walker (recently promoted to General) who arranged for his training as a surveyor. After spending the winter of 1878 in Yasin, Mukhtar Shah finally set off for Badakhshan in September 1879 on a journey that was to last for two and a half years and completed the mapping of the course of the Oxus.

Colonel H. C. B. Tanner, Deputy Superintendent of the GTS, who wrote up his report[62], noted that during the period of his explorations the countries along the Panj were a hotbed of intrigue and rebellion. Armies were on the move the whole time; battles were fought at many places; rulers were deposed and countries changed hands frequently. In those days all travellers were looked on with suspicion as being possible spies.

However, in Kulob and Darwaz

> the Tajik inhabitants had quite settled down under the rule of Bokhara, which had been established some two years prior to his visit. The rule of the king of Bokhara, though severe and strict to the last degree, was still carried out on principles that saved the newly conquered people from any great oppression, and roads that for a long time had become impassable from complete neglect were now being put into a state of repair, and traffic was to a certain degree encouraged … The country is in a prosperous condition owing to the sensible rule of the King of Bokhara, who sees wisdom in allowing the inhabitants to till the soil and take from them his share rather than depopulate the country by acts of exacting oppression, such as are now inflicted on the people of Badakhshan by the Afghans, and such as were formerly inflicted on Kolab and the adjacent countries by the tyrant king Murad Beg of Kataghan.[63]

From Faizabad, (where, interestingly, he noted that there were schools for girls run by women) Mukhtar Shah followed the route taken by the Havildar to Kulob, and then surveyed a slightly different route to Saghirdasht. Snow prevented him from travelling on the Havildar's route from there to Kala-i-Khum, and he was obliged to retrace his steps, finally reaching the Panj at Zigar, today the first village in Gorno-Badakhshan on the road from Kolab. From there he surveyed almost up to Voznavd before being turned back by Shughnan guards.

Mukhtar Shah was, however, obstinate. There now remained a gap in the survey of only about 50km upstream to Vomar, where the Munshi, coming from the opposite direction, had been unable to continue his work. Returning the way he had come, he crossed again to the left bank of the Panj and made his way across the mountains back to the Shiva lake, down to Bar Panjah and on to Vomar, where he finally completed the survey as far as Voznavd.

Surprisingly, however, his survey work was not over, and a new opportunity arose.

> Having now connected my work, I returned to Barzud village on 27th September [1880]. Being known as a great physician, I was requested by a man from the Bartang valley … to accompany him to Sarez and attend a sick person who was seriously ill.

The Bartang survey – up to Pasor and Sarez[64] – was completed on 23 October 1880 but, on his return to Bar Panjah, he fell ill and it was not until the following Spring that he could envisage returning

62 *Reports of Trans-Himalayan Explorations in Badakhshan* (1883), India Office Room 0011, C. 2c. Survey General's Office, Library General Number 7372.

63 By this time, the Sunni Mangit rulers of Bukhara had imposed forced conversion in the northern districts from the traditional Ismaili faith predominant in the Western Pamirs. In 1890, the inhabitants of Darwaz and Vanch petitioned the Russians to accept them as imperial subjects and rule them directly from Tashkent. See Robert D. Crews, *an Empire for the Faithful, a Colony for the Dispossessed,* (https://holy-writings.com/index.php?a=SHOWTEXT&d=%2Fen%2FBah%C3%A1%27%C3%AD+Faith%2F2+-+Bah%C3%A1%27%C3%AD+Studies%2FArticles+%28published%29%2FAn+Empire+for+the+Faithful%2C+A+Colony+for+the+Dispossessed.txt). Many of the Ismaili traditions are still preserved in Darwaz and Vanch, most notably music and dancing in which women participate.

64 The landslide that created the Sarez lake occurred in 1911 and, at the time of Mukhtar Shah's survey, the village of Sarez still existed.

home. The route upstream through Gharan to the Wakhan was closed because of political disturbances and, on 1 April 1881, he set off up the Shokhdara valley in the hope of reaching the Wakhan by this route, allowing him to make another unplanned survey.

He reached Djavshangoz a few days later, but the road beyond was blocked by snow and he was forced, yet again, to retrace his steps back to Bar Panjah. He confirmed, however, that "a road leads southward to the Panjah fort in Wakhan … [the Mats pass], and another eastward to Sar-i-Kul … [over the Koitezek pass to Murghab and Rang Kul – or to Khargush and the Great Pamir]." He also reported that the fortress at Djavshangoz "was once, according to my guide, a very flourishing town and the capital of Shakh Dara when Wakhan is said to have been subject to it." Finally, on 23 April, he was allowed to leave Bar Panjah and reached Gilgit on 8 July.

Pic. 31. Derudj castle, Djavshangoz (2005).

Mukhtar Shah provided not only the missing information on the Panj, but, by good fortune, surveys of the Bartang and Shokhdara valleys as well. The former confirmed Trotter's conclusion – based on local anecdotal evidence – that the Aksu, originating in the Chakmaktyn Lake in the Little Pamir became later in its course the Murghab and Bartang rivers, and was thus "the longest branch of the Oxus".[65]

* * * * *

The pundits did their work conscientiously under dangerous and difficult circumstances. While they certainly added to the sum of scientific knowledge of the Pamirs in the short period during which they were active, it may legitimately be asked whether this contribution was worth the physical and political risks involved. The pundits received very little for their labours, several of them fell seriously ill as a result of the hardships suffered and a few died. Saluting the achievement of the pundit Chandra Das, who provided the first surveys of Tibet, the American explorer and diplomat William Woodville Rockhill (1854–1914) commented that, had he been a European, "medals and decorations, lucrative

65 *JRGS*, Vol. 48 (1878), p. 205.

offices and professional promotion, freedom of the cities and every form of lionisation would have been his; but as for these native explorers a small pecuniary reward and obscurity are all to which they can look forward."[66]

While the Anglo-Russian frontier understanding of 1873 was certainly facilitated by the existence of the pundits' surveys, both sides wanted an agreement and, despite the work of the first pundits, there was still considerable uncertainty at that time – not to say confusion – about the key strategic area of the upper Wakhan and the source and course of the Oxus. The pundits revealed nothing about Russian intentions nor about the feasibility of Russian incursions into British India and, within a few years, their work was superseded by the results of scientific explorations by British, Russian and other missions. The reports by the pundits are, for the most part dry catalogues of what they saw; while they provide some interesting historical and cultural information, they give little feeling for the adventure of travel in uncharted territory and spectacular natural scenery.

Their masters were aware of this and sometimes complained about the lack of imagination of the 'natives'. In his summary of Mukhtar Shah's travels, for example, Colonel Tanner gave full vent to his frustration.

> M-S- says that there are lions also, and *babars*, an indefinite animal always played by the Asiatic on the European, and which is intended to represent a kind of condensed epitome of all unknown members of the cat tribe. The pacing of M-S- is not always strictly accurate; his historical facts can often be questioned: but his ignorance of the animal kingdom is beyond belief. To him there are *hiran*, which include all kinds of antelope, deer, stags, and the like; *shers* and *babars*,[67] by which he means tigers, lions, panthers and wild-cats. The mountain-goat, '*buz kohi*', comprises every other wild animal that exists on the face of the globe which is '*halal*' or eaten by Muhammadans. His ignorance of the vegetable kingdom is equally profound. I can only get out of him: 1. 'The black tree of Kashmir'; 2. 'The *safeda*', or poplar; 3. 'Thorns' or *khar*. The latter means ordinary vegetation, of whatever kind or sort, and which is beneath notice altogether. ….[68]
>
> Most natives … pass by the mightiest works of nature without lifting up their eyes to regard them, even for a moment. Our explorers have now traversed Upper Chitral, Yasin and the Oxus valley in many directions, and not one of them has ever given a hint of the existence of the immense mountain chains that wall in nearly every valley between Gilgit and Badakhshan. Not one of them has mentioned the lofty Tirach Mir or any of its huge snow-clad companions. The 'Havildar' gives a vivid description of his miseries when crossing the Nuksan pass and tells how he fell about amongst the blocks of ice at its base; but there is no mention of the peak of the great mountain between 25 and 26 thousand feet high that rears up its summit almost over head, and which actually gives origin to the ice masses over which he had to scramble and to the crevasses which he had to avoid. The 'Mullah,' who surveyed along the Kho and Mastauj valleys, makes no mention of the great expanse of snow which covers the lofty heights of the Tirach Mir, situated only a few miles distant, which, as Major Biddulph writes, 'fills the entire view'. The Mullah, the Havildar, Abdul Subhan, and lastly M-S-, who one after the other travelled along the valley of the Oxus, made no mention of the immense snow needles

66 Quoted in *Tournament of Shadows*, op. cit., p. 407.
67 'Sher/shir' is Farsi (and Urdu) for 'lion and 'babur/babbar' for 'tiger'.
68 *Reports of Trans-Himalayan Explorations in Badakhshan*, op. cit., p. 7.

> which rise up south of Zebak and Ishkashim, and which many centuries previously had attracted the attention of the Chinese explorers when passing down that way. A native cannot give the slightest description of any country, however well he may be acquainted with it. Into trivial particulars he will minutely enter, and while he will tell you how at such and such a camp, which was 267 yards from the stream, there were only three mulberry trees, and one of them was broken off at the top, the great works of nature take no hold on his imagination, or if they do, the recollection of them is quickly effaced from memory.[69]

Nevertheless, as Waller points out,

> The pundits, because they were Asiatic and were disguised as bona fide travelers, were able to go where Europeans could not. They left an immense achievement behind them, including geographical and other details on a vast region of largely unknown territory, concentrated in Tibet but including much of Afghanistan, the Central Asian Khanates, the Pamir, Chinese Turkestan, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Assam. This was an area of over one million square miles, more than ten times the size of Great Britain. Unlike Britain, however, this was the domain of the world's greatest mountain peaks, of vast deserts and of cold and desolate high altitude plateaus, often infested with brigands and administered by hostile authorities. Information on the topography of this region, the customs of its inhabitants, and the nature of its government and military resources was gained under conditions of extreme deprivation and great danger. Some pundits paid with their lives; others lost their health.

Tanner's comment – certainly shared by many of his colleagues on the GTS – is unfair, not to say racist, and ignores the bravery and devotion to duty of these early explorers.

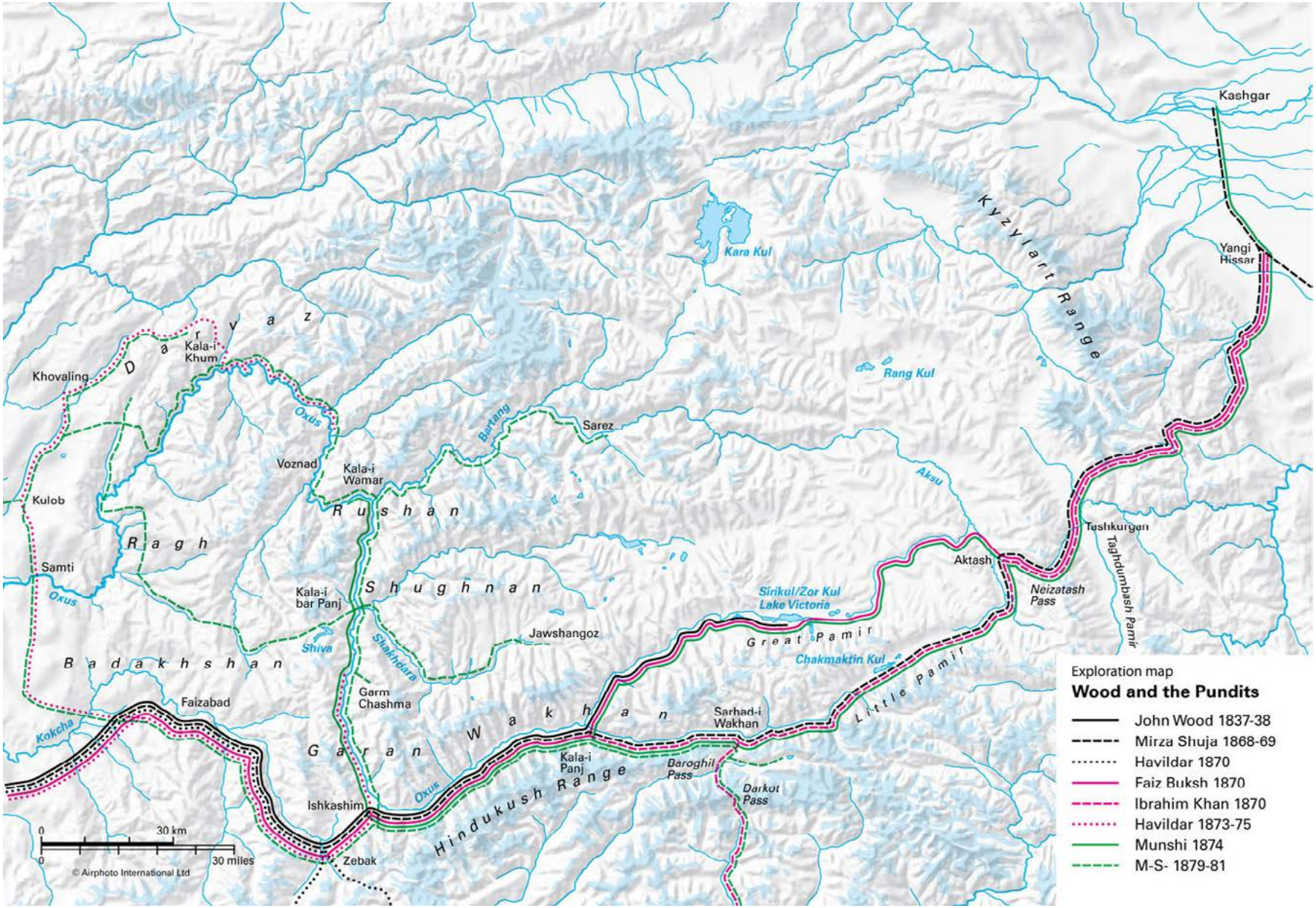
Pic. 32. "Snow needles" in the Hindu Kush as seen from the Wakhan (2000).

69 *Reports of Trans-Himalayan Explorations in Badakhshan*, op. cit., p. 22.

Derek Waller concludes:[70]

> Their actions may have helped, in a small way, to raise British consciousness of Indians in general. Surely, wrote one civil servant, "men of the same race as Col. Montgomerie's Native trans-Himalayan explorers can . . . be entrusted with responsible offices in the survey of the plains of India."[71] The last word is perhaps best left to Perceval Landon, who accompanied the Younghusband Expedition to Lhasa as a correspondent of The Times: "When the story of Asian exploration is finally and worthily written, the work of these lonely spies … must receive a place of honour second to none."[72]

70 Waller, op. cit. pp. 272–273.
71 Political letter 137, dated 30 October 1881, from Simla to London, U P & Sl7130, p. 705.
72 Landon, Perceval. *Lhasa; an Account of the Country and People of Central Tibet and of the Progress of the Mission Sent There by the English Government in the Years 1903–4*. 2 vols. London, 1905, Vol. 2, 23.



GBAO Exploration Wood and the Pundits.