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The Nushki-Sistan route from Quetta to eastern Persia

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during the morning a strong wind blew in fitful gusts, raising a whole host of sand-devils, that spun in wild gyrations over the dreary waste. Mirage, too, dazzling the eye and bewildering the senses with its elusive and incessant tremor, produced for our edification some of its most fantastic illusions, a weird sample displaying a flock of sheep floating gently about in the air with a filmy blue vapour beneath them. During the day I passed a caravan of about forty donkeys, and noticed on one or two occasions shepherds driving their sheep and goats over the plain to pick up what nourishment they could from the dry and dusty scrub that grew there. By 5 P.M. we reached the building, a large, empty barn obviously devoted as much to animals as to men. A small party of Hazara pilgrims also spent the night here. I had met one or two of these pilgrims before, tramping wearily along to Mashhad, and I am bound to say I could not help being struck with their implicit trust in Providence. One man I call to mind accosted me on the road before I reached Sistan, begging for a meal and a little money. Six weeks later I met the same individual close to Birjand, still tramping light-heartedly along with not so much as a coin in his pocket, his worldly goods consisting of a rug, which he carried on his back. He was entirely dependent on the hospitality of the villagers he met for mere existence, yet it never so much as entered his head that he might never reach the holy city.

The following day we crossed the remainder of the plain, reaching a village called Khairabad, at the foot of hilly ground, and next day reached Turbat-i-Haidari. Thence a toilsome journey over mountain-ridges covered with ice and snow took me to the holy city of Mashhad, the end of my journey.

THE NUSHKI-SISTAN ROUTE FROM QUETTA TO EASTERN PERSIA.

By S. H. F. CAPENNY.

(*With Map.*)

THE Nushki route is an ancient Indo-Persian highway which the Government of India has been having energetically opened up and developed anew since December 1896. The commercial and strategical importance of Nushki had been previously well known and recognised, as by Sir C. Macgregor, Colonel Mark Bell, and Lord Curzon. Colonel Mark Bell in his Report on his journey from Quetta to Trebizond in the autumn of 1888, which was printed at Calcutta in 1892, and Lord Curzon in his work on Persia, which likewise appeared in 1892, had both advocated immediate consideration of the Nushki route to Sistan. It was hardly possible, however, at that time for this route to be utilised as a commercial highway on account of local insecurity and of political uncertainty regarding territories and boundaries. The most direct route from Nushki to Sistan led through the Chagai district to the Halmand, and

this district had been occupied by the Amir of Afghanistan, who was opposed to caravan trade through his territory and levied prohibitive duties. It was therefore necessary for caravans to make their way farther south, where other uncertainties regarding territory were encountered between Baluchistan and Persia. It thus happened that between Nushki and Sistan there was no secure highway. By the end of 1896, however, a new order of things had commenced. In accordance with the Durand Agreement (1893) with the Amir, which assigned the Chagai district to the British sphere, a Delimitation Commission was occupied (from 1894 to 1896) with the work of demarcating the boundary line of 800 miles between Afghanistan and Baluchistan from Domandi at the junction of the Kundar and the Gumal rivers to the Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siyah, where meet the territories of Persia, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan. This Baluch-Afghan Boundary Commission, under Captain A. H. M'Mahon, started in March 1894, reached Domandi early in April 1894, and Nushki in the end of February 1896, and terminated its work on the Persian border in June 1896. In accordance with an Anglo-Persian Agreement in 1895, a Perso-Baluch Boundary Commission, under Sir Thomas Holdich, was occupied in February and March 1896 with the delimitation of some 300 miles of border-line from Kuhak or Kohuk on the Mashkhel river to the Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siyah. Thereupon the Government of India made arrangements, in December 1896, for the opening up of a trade-route from Quetta to Sistan through Nushki.

What the trade of Sistan was like about that time may be seen in the account which Colonel C. E. Yate gives in his book on Khurasan and Sistan, from a visit which he paid as Consul-General to the Sistan district in the beginning of 1894. "As to trade," he says, "I found that there were no regular traders in Sistan at all, nor any foreigners, except a few Kainis who dealt in skins and wool. As a rule, the different villages clubbed together and sent a *kafila* to Bandar Abbas or to Quetta once a year in the autumn, returning in spring. About 3000 camel-loads were said to leave Sistan in this way annually, 500 of which went to Quetta with ghee and a little wool, and all the remainder to Bandar Abbas with wool and goatskins, bringing back in return tea, indigo, spices, sugar, and a small quantity of piece goods. The things thus brought did not as a rule come into the town bazar, but were taken by the camel *kafilas* to the villages direct. The supply was said to be generally not sufficient to last out the year, and the people had to eke out the last few months with goods from Birjand, which were mostly Russian. The Sistan bazar at Násirabad [Nasratabad] I found absolutely empty. There was nothing in it at all but a small quantity of Russian sugar, with, curiously enough, the British arms on the label, and two packets of Belgian candles. Some 7000 camel-loads of hides, wool, and goat-skins were said to be sent to Sabzawar every year for exportation to Russia, and the imports from Russia in return were iron cooking-pots, piece goods, and sugar. Russian sugar, I found, was sold in Sistan at a little less price than it was sold in Birjand. It was curious to see

how the further it went the cheaper it got."—(*Khurasan and Sistan*, 1900, pp. 84-85.)

But the district of Sistan is not the main field of trade for which this new trade-route is designed as a highway of communication. It is chiefly Khurasan and its capital, the celebrated sacred city of Mashhad. There Anglo-Indian trade comes now into keen competition with that of Russia. Up to the year 1896-97, the British trade with Mashhad had been more important than that of Russia, but during the three preceding years the Russian imports had been steadily increasing and the British imports steadily declining. The efforts of the Russian Government to increase their trade by giving subsidies, making roads, establishing consular agencies in different districts of Khurasan, and affording other facilities to their traders, had been crowned with success. Russian merchants, encouraged by the measures taken by their Government for the purpose of improving trade, had poured into the province and started businesses in different parts throughout it: they had established centres for the purchase of wool and skins in Turbat-i-Haidari, Turbat-i-Shaikh Jam, and Birjand, and had opened depôts of sugar, kerosene oil, and cotton prints in Mashhad and Sabzawar. Thus they were pushing on their trade to all parts of Khurasan, and even as far south as Sistan, in districts far away from the Russian border and near the British frontier, where the Anglo-Indian goods should command the market.

Such was the report which Colonel Yate transmitted to the Foreign Office in 1897. He called attention to the fact that Anglo-Indian goods do not reach Eastern Persia through any British or Indian merchants, but through village shopkeepers, pilgrims, travellers, or camel-men; that British and Indian traders have no such facilities as those enjoyed by Russian traders; that they are handicapped by their goods being conveyed by long, difficult, and expensive journeys before they reach Mashhad, and, having to work under many great disadvantages, are losing ground daily.

The routes of Russian trade with Khurasan are from Gaz or Bandar-i-Gaz on the south-east shore of the Caspian Sea, through Astarabad, Shahrud, and Sabzawar to Mashhad, and from Askhabad or Ashkabad, on the Central Asia Railway, to Kuchan and Mashhad. The routes of British trade are partly through Tirabzun (Trebizond) in Anatolia, Tabriz, and Tihran to Mashhad, but mainly from the Persian Gulf port of Bandar Abbas. The caravan highways from this port to Mashhad lead mostly through either Kirman or Yazd. Major Molesworth Sykes in his report on Kirman for 1894-95 said that the main portion of the Bandar-Abbas-Khurasan trade avoided Kirman altogether, choosing the longer route through Yazd, both because of the chance of finding a market there, and because it was impossible to obtain protection by the direct road. The nearest point to Kirman struck by the caravans from Bandar Abbas was Bahrambad. The direct route from Bandar Abbas to Mashhad led through Kirman, Rawar, and Tun. It would pay, he said, to use this direct route much more extensively, as the saving in transport would be great. Its advantages, however, had been discounted

from the absence of any consular control. As a proof of the actual track by the direct route he mentioned that a wagon occasionally brought passengers and goods right through from Mashhad to Kirman without encountering any difficulties.

In 1897 Colonel Yate gave in his consular report the following account of the caravan route generally taken from Bandar Abbas to Mashhad :—

Names of Places.	Distance in Miles.	Number of Marches.
Bandar Abbas,
Saidabad,	265	11
Kirman,	114	5
Naiband,	180	11
Birjand,	130	5
Kain,	63	3
Turbat-i-Haidari,	137	7
Mashhad,	77	4
Total,	966	46

This route of 966 miles could thus be traversed in forty-six marches averaging 21 miles each, but camels take from seventy-five to ninety days, and consignments were often delayed in transit for a long time owing to—

- (1) Difficulties with the customs officials at the port ;
- (2) Laziness of forwarding agents ;
- (3) Transport not being procurable always at Bandar Abbas or Kirman ;
- (4) Unsatisfactory arrangements with the carriers ;
- (5) The goods changing hands three times *en route* ;
- (6) Delays in getting fresh transport ; and
- (7) Interference and unjust demands of customs officials at intermediate stations.

It was with a view to removing all those obstacles which traders had to contend with on this and other routes to Khurasan, and in order to improve British trade, that the British Government made its arrangements in December 1896 to open a new, direct, and easy trade-route between India and Eastern Persia. The following is Colonel Yate's account of the Nushki route in 1897 :—

Names of Places.	Distance in Miles.	Number of Marches.
Quetta,
Nushki,	80	4
Dalbandin,	110	5
Amir Chah,	184	8
Kub-i-Malik-i-Siyah,	134	7
Sihkuha,	76	4
Nasratabad or Nasirabad (Sistan),	21	1
Bandan,	50	3
Neh or Nih,	45	2
Birjand,	115	5
Kain,	63	3
Turbat-i-Haidari,	137	7
Mashhad,	77	4
Total,	1092	53

This new route through Nushki, estimated by Colonel Yate at 1092 miles from Quetta to Mashhad, could thus be traversed in 53 marches averaging $20\frac{1}{2}$ miles each. The advantages of this new caravan highway, with wells dug at convenient intervals and levy-posts established at different stages all along the route to secure the safety of caravans and to facilitate their passage through the desert tracts, were considered to be that as the route passes entirely through territory which is under British control as far as the border of Sistan, the caravans would have no fear of the imposition of heavy dues by Afghan officials or of Baluch raids; that camel-grazing and wood are procurable at every stage, and grass at most, while arrangements were being made for the provision of grain also; and that cheap camel transport is available at Quetta, in Sistan, and at other places along the route. Although the distance is 126 miles longer than that of the Bandar Abbas-Kirman route, wrote Colonel Yate in 1897, yet the journey would only occupy about two months (including halts), instead of at least 75 days or three months taken by camels by the Bandar Abbas-Kirman route. Besides, the sea-voyage from Karachi to Bandar Abbas would be avoided, as well as the obstacles, troubles, and inconveniences mentioned above, which are often experienced on the Bandar Abbas-Kirman road. With proper forwarding agents at Quetta and carriers engaged for the whole journey, which could be easily arranged, the goods would come from Quetta to Mashhad without changing hands or delay in transit, as there are no customs officials to interfere with caravans. The customs official on the Sistan frontier would give passes free of charge to the carriers, and 5 per cent. *ad valorem* duty would be paid at Mashhad. The road, he added, was already showing signs of becoming very popular, and was likely to expand British-Indian trade with Sistan and Khurasan to a great extent. He

noted, moreover, that the opening of this new trade-route might help British-Indian merchants to improve their positions, provided that consular protection and other facilities were afforded them at central points on the road between Sistan and Mashhad. At that time there was no British consular agent either at Nasratabad or at Birjand, though at both places Russian consular agents had for some years been posted. In the absence of such British agents who could protect and give the necessary assistance to traders, the latter were likely to meet with many serious obstacles.

The imports of foreign goods to Mashhad from India (*via* Bombay and Bandar Abbas) were estimated in 1892-93 at £211,868; in 1893-94, £198,496; in 1894-95, £312,123; in 1895-96, £199,167; and in 1896-97, £89,547. The imports from Russian territory for the same years were estimated at: £80,166; £72,394; £59,208; £86,929; £92,547 respectively. The corresponding exports to India amounted to £31,314; £8,428; £6,871; £22,269; and £19,681. To Russian territory the exports amounted to £36,024; £27,750; £24,458; £67,889; £80,320. Such were the respective amounts up to the opening of this Nushki route. It may be as well to give here the amounts for 1897-98, 1898-99, and 1899-1900. The imports from India (*via* Bombay and Bandar Abbas) amounted to £130,282; £123,328; and £142,099 respectively. The exports to India amounted to £40,083; £37,557; and £42,466. The imports from Russian territory amounted to £121,279; £163,322; and £178,708. The exports to the same amounted to £79,453; £124,792; and £147,075.

Such was the commerce of Khurasan for which it was hoped this Nushki route would enable India the better to compete. As soon as the Baluch-Afghan Boundary Commission had terminated its work, Captain Webb-Ware, who had been one of its members, was appointed to the charge of the Chagai district, and he at once commenced to open a caravan route, an arrangement having been made with the Khan of Kalat whereby the Government of India took over the administration of the Nushki district and the border strip of desert between Quetta and Sistan. Since 1899 this Nushki district has been leased from the Khan of Kalat on a perpetual quit rent of Rs. 9000 per annum. "This small tract of Kalat territory is interposed like a wedge between the desert tracts of Chagai, through which the trade-route runs to the Persian frontier, and which are under our political control, and the Shararud pargans of the British Indian district of Pishin. The authority of the Khan over this distant corner of his dominions was very slight, the tribes were constantly at feud with each other, and with the Amir's subjects in the neighbouring district of Sharawak, and the portion of the trade-route which passed through their country was very insecure. The acquisition of this tract by the British Government was therefore of importance in the interest of the new road; it has the further advantage that it completes the belt of administered territory which now runs all along the border of Afghanistan from Domandi, on the Gumal river, to the frontier of Sistan, and practically the whole of the trade-route now lies in territory under British control."—(*Report on the Administration of the Baluchistan Agency for 1899-1900*, p. 17.)

All accounts agree in celebrating the important success which has crowned Captain Webb-Ware's energy and enterprise, and the hard work by which it has been achieved.¹ By digging wells, erecting thanas, and organising levy-posts, he has succeeded in making it a secure highway of trade between India and Persia. At Nushki a large bazar has been erected consisting of 133 shops and 109 houses; a dispensary was opened on the 4th February 1900; besides the telegraph and post-office at Nushki, branch post-offices have been opened at Dalbandin, Merui, Amir Chah, and Robat. The chief places along the route from Nushki to the Persian border are Dalbandin, Merui, Amir Chah, and Saindak. Some five miles beyond Robat the route passes into Persian territory, skirting the base of the Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siyah. Hurmak, where a Persian customs post has now been established, stands on the slope of the hills, but beyond is a desert plain. Between this point and Nasratabad, the capital of Sistan, there is a small Dak post at Gardi Chah, supported by the British Government to facilitate the carriage of letters to Birjand. Gardi Chah, says Captain Wyatt, holds an important position, as all caravans passing from India to Persia or Afghanistan must stop there, as it is the only place where water can be obtained for a considerable distance. From Nushki to Robat on the Persian border it is some 500 miles. The march from Quetta to Nushki, a distance of 96 miles, is made in seven stages by large caravans, by smaller in five. From Nushki to Robat it is a journey of eighteen marches; five to Dalbandin, three to Merui, and ten to Robat. The three marches between Saindak and Robat are on the daman or slope of the mountains. Robat is half a march from the Kuh-i-Malik-i-Siyah.

Some details regarding the route may be cited from Captain Wyatt's account. He set out from Quetta on the 19th of May 1899. Up to Nushki the road leads through the stony hills and passes of the Baluch Highlands in a comparatively cool climate, but after that he found the heat excessive, Nushki generally recording about 10° to 15° more than Sibi or Jacobabad. At Nushki, "which is developing into quite a city under Captain Webb-Ware's able management," he found that it was impossible to travel by day owing to the heat, and made arrangements to start in the evening at sunset, and to travel through the night. "A great comfort," he says, "about these parts is that a few hours after sunset the atmosphere gets quite cool and the night is pleasant; but for several stages out of Nushki the heat was tremendous during the day, far too hot to sleep, and absolutely necessary to drink a certain amount of water (usually very salt in the desert) every half hour or so, to prevent going down with heat apoplexy." On the 24th of May he arrived at Dalbandin, the road being all the way on the flat, with high,

¹ See Captain F. O. Wyatt's "The Western Glacis of India," *Proceedings of the Royal Artillery Institution* for March 1900, vol. xxvii.; Lord Ronaldshay on "The New Anglo-Persian Trade-Route" in the *Times*, 30th October 1901; Mr. Edward Penton's paper on "The New Trade-Route to Persia by Nushki and Sistan" in the *Journal of the Society of Arts*, December 20, 1901, and the *Board of Trade Journal*, 1897-1901, *passim*.

precipitous hills to the south and a plain on the north stretching away into Afghanistan. From Dalbandin to Merui, which he reached on the 26th May, he marched over some stony plains, and then over undulating plains to Amir Chah, which he reached on the 31st May. On the 3rd June he arrived at Saindak, a small post situated in the hills above the sandy desert, the road having led over shifting sandhills some 200 feet high in places. From Saindak he marched through the hills to Robot, where he arrived on the 6th of June, having taken twenty-two days to travel 500 miles.

During the last two years great progress has been made, and at each stage along the route there now exist a caravanserai, a guard, and a supply of drinkable water, while Indian traders who sell supplies at fixed rates are stationed at the more important points. A bi-weekly post runs both ways as far as Sistan, and a road, fifteen feet in width, runs from Nushki, to which point there is a metalled road.

Since the end of 1898 the Nushki-Sistan route has become increasingly a commercial success. The trade through Nushki amounted to Rs. 5,89,929 in 1897-98; Rs. 7,28,082 in 1898-99; Rs. 12,35,411 in 1899-1900. In 1900-1 it amounted to 15½ lakhs (Rs. 15,34,452), about £103,000.

An important concession has been granted by several of the Indian railways—a rebate of one-third on all freights coming or going by the Nushki route. In April last it was announced from Ceylon that the Kangra tea-planters had decided to send a caravan of one hundred camels along the Nushki route to Persia in June or July. In his report for 1900 the vice-consul at Bandar Abbas says that there is no doubt the growing popularity of the Nushki route is telling more adversely every year on the trade of Bandar Abbas. The Birjand and Sistan caravans of four thousand and three thousand camels yearly, during 1900 deserted Bandar Abbas entirely for the first time, and it will probably be found that a good deal of the trade they represent has gone by the Nushki-Quetta route, which is secure, while the main caravan routes between Bandar Abbas and Yazd and Kirman are stated to have been more than usually unsafe during the year, and on more than one occasion the road was partially blocked for a time.

It is necessary to recognise the important work which Colonel Chenevix-Trench, the Consul-General at Mashhad, and Major Molesworth Sykes, the consul at Kirman, have both done in promoting the success of this commercial enterprise. By their efforts a consulate has been established at Nasratabad, and a consular agency at Birjand; and the Nushki-Sistan route has now been opened up by the energy and enterprise of Major Molesworth Sykes¹ to Kirman as well as to Khurasan.

It is considered, however, that the further development of this commercial highway demands improved facilities for the carriage of goods between Quetta and Nushki, and that all efforts should be directed towards making Nushki, and not Quetta, the goal of inward-bound caravans, and the starting-point of outward-bound caravans. It

¹ See his paper on Eastern Persia in *J.R.G.S.*, February 1902.

is impossible on account of the climate for camels to remain at Quetta for any length of time, and when large caravans make a halt of any duration the camels have to be sent either to Nushki or to Sibi. This disadvantage increases considerably the cost of freight. It is therefore proposed to make a railway from Quetta to Nushki, and a survey of the route has been made. Whether this line of railway has been sanctioned or not, as reported, it may not be inopportune to recollect that Colonel Mark Bell has proposed, from military considerations, that a road should lead from Darwaza at the head of the Bolan to Nushki, and that Lord Curzon has spoken of this same route as a feasible line for a railway to follow.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the feasibility of this railway from Quetta to Nushki and the Sistan border, it may be permitted me to refer to an article on an Indo-European Highway which appeared with a map in this *Magazine* for September 1900, and to say that, according to a note which the editor received from Colonel Mark Bell, the route which he would propose from Nushki to Sistan was not quite correctly shown on that map, as he would make it dip down south through Kharan and the Mashkel river country, so as to develop Baluchistan, which is one of the best camel-rearing countries in the world, and much of which is capable of well irrigation, if Indian colonies were planted.

PROPOSED NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF GEOGRAPHY.

The Editor, Scottish Geographical Magazine.

EDINBURGH, 12th March 1902.

DEAR SIR,—With reference to Mr. Bartholomew's "Plea for a National Institute of Geography," and to my "Draft Plan" and "Note," published in your last issue, the accompanying selection of letters may be of interest.—Yours faithfully,

P. GEDDES.

From the RIGHT HON. JAMES BRYCE, M.P., D.C.L., F.R.S.

I have read your paper with much interest and sympathy. Beyond the expression of hearty goodwill for the scheme of a Geographical Institute, as outlined by yourself and Mr. Bartholomew, I have little or nothing to say. The idea of an Institute of Geography, which shall cover Geography in its three leading aspects, Physical, Historical, and Economic, seems to me an admirable one. The scenic element ought also to be regarded. The combination of graphical presentments, with a store of knowledge accumulated in a complete library, ought to be most serviceable not merely educationally, but also to advanced students on the one hand, and to practical men, such as engineers, merchants, and financiers, on the other. An Outlook Tower, like that which you have