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The Nushki trade route

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APPENDIX

THE NUSHKI TRADE ROUTE *

A MUCH NEEDED RAILWAY

BY SIR HUGH BARNES, K.C.S.I., K.C.V.O

At a time like the present, when the grant for capital expenditure on Indian railways has been cut down from £12,000,000 to £3,000,000, it may seem rash to propose the construction of a new line, especially of a frontier line. But there is one project to which the events of the war have added so much importance, both from the commercial and the political point of view, that I think it deserves the serious consideration of the Government of India. I refer to a proposal more than once made, but never carried out, for building a light line of railway from Nushki to Nasratabad in Sistan, or, at any rate, to our Frontier post at Koh-i-Malik Siah, on the Sistan border.

The Nushki trade route from Quetta to Sistan was opened in 1897 in the hope of developing an overland trade between India and Persia. It was at that date placed in charge of Lieutenant (now Lieutenant-Colonel) Webb Ware, of the Political Department, who, as Political Agent for Chagai, has with unabated zeal and enthusiasm remained in charge of it almost continuously for the past nineteen years. It is mainly to his energy, enterprise, and knowledge of the people that the success hitherto achieved is due.

In the beginning the trade was small. Camel carriage was the only means of transporting goods over the 450 miles intervening between Quetta and Sistan, and the first 100 miles from Quetta down to the edge of the desert at Nushki ran through a network of hills, and was difficult. When Lord Curzon came to India he cordially supported the development of the route, and his Viceroyalty saw the appointment of a British Consul in Sistan, the establishment there of a branch of the Imperial Bank of Persia, and finally the construction of a railway on the standard gauge from Quetta to Nushki, thus eliminating the difficulties of the first part of the route. From Nushki to the Sistan border the trade is still carried on camels, but the road, which runs for the most part between the Kharan Hills and the Registan Desert, passes over an absolutely flat pebbly plain, presenting no difficulties to the construction of a light railway.

The railway to Nushki had an immediate effect on the trade, which has now reached a value of about £350,000 per annum. But this appears to be the maximum obtainable under present conditions, not only because of the increasing expense and great delay of camel carriage, but also because the limit of camel transport appears to have been reached. Unless something can be done the trade is likely to remain at a standstill, but if means can be found of increasing, quickening, and cheapening the transport facilities, a very great expansion may be looked for, even in ordinary times.

The present moment offers an exceptional opportunity for taking action. Owing to the war, Russia has prohibited exports to Persia, trade by the Baghdad-Kermanshah route has ceased, and all the

* Formerly contributed to the *Indiaman* by Sir Hugh Barnes.

southern routes to the Gulf have been closed by the German intrigues. The Nushki route, therefore, is practically the only channel left open to Persia's foreign trade. Not long ago it was reported that no less than 2,000 camel loads of goods were stacked on the Nushki railway platform awaiting onward despatch, but that sufficient camels were not forthcoming. In September last the manager of the Imperial Bank of Persia at Meshed wrote:

"There is not the slightest doubt in my mind that if quick transport were available on the route from Nushki to Sistan the piece goods import trade would be diverted from its present channel, and possibly also the large wool and cotton exports from this province could be profitably exported via India."

He added:

"We cannot but hope that the attention of our Government will be directed to the great possibilities for our trade which would now ensue from the Nushki route being better organized and a general speeding up of the transport. We venture to state that the result would astonish everyone."

It may be added that camels take the best part of a month to reach Sistan from Nushki, and the friction, delays, and disappointments connected with the organizing of caravans are a serious deterrent to enterprise. By rail goods could reach our Frontier at Koh-i-Malik Siah in a day. That is very briefly the case for the railway from the commercial point of view.

The political and administrative advantages of the line are hardly less important. I fancy the general public have a very hazy idea of what the Germans have been doing in Persia. That unhappy country, being neutral and of no military value to any of the combatants, might reasonably have expected to keep aloof from the great conflict. But this was not the view of the Germans. At an early stage of the war they incited the Turks to attack and occupy Tabriz, whence, fortunately, they were speedily driven by the Russians.

Next Ahwaz was threatened, but here British troops detached from the Basra expedition stood in the way. Then Kermanshah was occupied, and at Teheran the German, Austrian, and Turkish Ministers planned, in effect, to kidnap the Shah and his Government, in the hope of forcing Persia to join the Central Powers. The plot failed, thanks to the exertions of the British and Russian Ministers and the timely advance of Russian troops. The conspirators took refuge first in Kum, and then in Ispahan. They posed as the supporters of the Democratic party, preached a Holy War, suborned the Persian gendarmerie and their Swedish officers, rushed in arms and ammunition through Kermanshah, and raised from the dregs of the population a miscellaneous collection of armed levies.

The result has been that gradually during the past six months we have had the humiliation of seeing our Consuls and bank managers driven in succession from Kermanshah, Hamadan, Sultanabad, Ispahan, Shiraz, Yezd, and Kirman. Kirman was the last place to be seized. It was captured, we are told, by a party of thirty or forty Germans and Austrians, aided by some tribesmen and malcontented from the town, in spite of the loyal efforts of the Bakhtiari Governor, Sirdar-ul-Zafar. The advance of Russian troops in the west has cleared Kermanshah, Hamadan, Sultanabad, and Ispahan of the German filibusters, but Shiraz, Yezd, and Kirman still remain in their

hands, and the British Consul at Shiraz, Major O'Connor, and the local manager of the Imperial Bank, Mr. Fergusson, are still detained as prisoners in the hills above Bushire.

But what, it may be asked, has all this to do with the Nushki Railway? Well, in the first place, the unrest in Persia has compelled the Indian Government, at great expense and with much delay, to strengthen its forces on the Sistan border. Secondly, it clearly behoves us to co-operate with the Russians in reasserting the authority of the Persian Government by clearing, at any rate, our own sphere of the German "banditti." For this purpose what a boon this railway would have been had it existed at the present time! We could certainly have saved Kirman. We could also have prevented or promptly punished the murderous raids which during the past two years, under German instigation, have been made from Persian Baluchistan on the peaceful inhabitants of the Mekran. In short, with the aid of the railway we could, with the minimum of expense and effort, have ensured the maintenance of Persian authority in South-Eastern Persia and have kept the peace of the border.

In a previous article I pointed out the political and commercial advantages of the proposed line from Nushki, and suggested that had the railway been in existence now it would have been of great value in enabling us to frustrate German intrigue in Eastern Persia.

With this object-lesson before us of the value of the line, both to the Persian Government and to ourselves, it is surely wise to see that we are not caught a second time without it. The Germans, in our place, with their usual foresight, would, no doubt, have constructed the line long ago, or if it had not been made at the beginning of the war, they would have pushed it on rapidly during the past year. Our failure to recognize its value in time is one more instance of British lack of preparation. Let us, at any rate, exercise some imagination now. The utility of the railway will not cease with the end of the war. The Indian Government is deeply interested in the maintenance of the independence and prosperity of Persia. England and Russia have mutually agreed to respect her independence and integrity. As one of the objects of this war is to uphold the observance of treaties, it is inconceivable—so long as Persia remains neutral—that this agreement should fail to be observed. We may be confident, therefore, that after the war the British and Russian Governments will make a determined effort to set Persia on her legs once more. It will greatly assist us in contributing our share towards the accomplishment of this desirable aim, and will also ensure for all time the security of our own Frontier if the Indian communications with the Persian border are improved in the way suggested.

It will not be out of place to mention that in another direction also the proposed line would have a military value which is not to be despised. Not only would it greatly reduce the cost of our Frontier posts, but, as may be seen from a glance at the map, the power rapidly to place and maintain a military force on the Sistan border would, in the event of trouble in or with Afghanistan, at once give us the control of the Helmund valley up to Girishk—a very important advantage.

There remain to be considered the administrative advantages of the line. One of them would probably be a considerable saving in the cost of maintaining our troops in Quetta. Sistan, watered by the Helmund, is the granary of Eastern Persia, and, owing to its inaccessi-

bility and its peninsular position, almost surrounded by deserts, grain and flour, sheep, wool, and ghi, are extraordinarily cheap, and could be landed in Quetta at lower prices than supplies from India. Another gain would be the opportunities afforded for the development of the country on the British side of the border. It is true that in appearance it would be difficult to find anywhere a more barren and desolate-looking tract than that through which the route passes after leaving Nushki, with the bare Kharan Hills on one side, and on the other the great Baluch desert, known as the Registan. But the security afforded by the existing road, with its line of levy posts, has already done much to settle the nomad population down to peaceful pursuits, to increase their flocks and herds, and to add to the revenue. The influence of the railway would, obviously, be much wider. According to Colonel Webb Ware, who knows the country more intimately than anyone else, it would open up a highly mineralized tract where salt can be obtained in unlimited quantities, and iron, copper, lead, sulphur, antimony, and ochre are known to exist. He also believes in the possibility of extensive cultivation from the waters of the Mashkel River if only a railway were available to carry away the produce to the markets of Quetta. All our experience on the Indian Frontier tends to show that even in the most inhospitable surroundings a railway tends in a very astonishing way to create traffic where none appeared to exist before.

But what, it may be asked, would be the cost of the line? It is important that the line should be treated purely as a branch or feeder line to the main railway at Nushki, and that it should be constructed on a narrow gauge, preferably the metre gauge. This for two reasons—first, that the line must be a cheap one; and, secondly, because it is desirable that no encouragement should be given to the notion that it might form a link in the proposed Transpersian Railway, which it is desired should run along the coast. The distance from Nushki to our Frontier outpost at Koh-i-Malik Shah is about 350 miles. The line for the whole way would traverse a flat plain, free from all engineering difficulties. A telegraph-line already exists, and intermediate stations would be few, and might be of the simplest and most inexpensive description. I am told on high authority that in a country such as that described the cost of laying the permanent way of a metre gauge line with light 36-pound rails would probably not exceed Rs. 24,000 per mile, even at present prices. If second-hand rails were used the cost would be less. Some of the metre-gauge lines in Sind are said to have been laid down for Rs. 15,000 per mile. Extra charges would be the survey expenses and cost of rolling stock. But probably old rolling stock, quite good enough for the immediate purposes of the line, could be obtained cheaply from the metre-gauge lines in India.

If these suppositions are correct, it is obvious the cost of the line would not be very great, and it could be laid at a very rapid rate. Probably, owing to the demands of the war, the Indian Government have no old rails in stock, and it would take some time to obtain a new supply. But I suggest that it should be possible to utilize the coming summer months in pushing on a survey of the line and preparing estimates, so that the construction, if decided on, can be begun in the early autumn.

Meanwhile, as a temporary arrangement, it might be practicable to relieve the congestion of traffic by organizing a motor-lorry service

from Nushki for at any rate a portion of the way to the Frontier. This would greatly relieve the strain on the supply of camels. But I have no hesitation in saying that a motor service would be no adequate substitute for a railway. The maintenance of a permanent and regular service would require the construction of a first-class metalled road, which would take as long to make, be far less satisfactory, and nearly as expensive as the light railway suggested. It is the railway that is really needed, and the adoption of half measures is likely to end, as is so often the case, in a waste of public money.