



ČĀRĪKĀR

ČĀRĪKĀR (also Čahārīkār), the main town of Kōhdāman and the administrative capital of the Afghan province of Parwān, located about 63 km north of Kabul.

Throughout history there has been an important urban center at the northern end of the long Kōhdāman depression, though the site has shifted back and forth between the confluence of the Ġōrband and Panjšēr rivers, on the central axis of the depression, and the western edge about a dozen kilometers away. Kāpišī, the capital of the Kushan empire, was established on the former site; modern Čārīkār (elev. 1,550m) stands on the latter. The succession of cities on one or the other of these sites reflects a remarkable continuity of urban life, which can be explained by the exceptional advantages of the location at a natural crossroads, where all the northern routes across the Hindu Kush between the Šebar pass on the west and the Anjoman pass on the east converge before branching off in two southern routes, one toward Kabul and the Helmand basin via the piedmont of the Paḡmān mountains, the other toward India via the Panjšēr valley and the Nangrahār. The latter route, with its northern extension through the wide Ġōrband valley to the Šebar pass, the “old route from Bactria to Taxila” described by A. Foucher, was a major axis for the movement of men and ideas (e.g., Buddhism) before the Ghaznavid period. It was then supplanted by the Kabul-Šebar route; since 1964 the more direct Sālang road has provided a permanent link between Kabul and northern Afghanistan. The need for a caravan station at the hub of this radial network of roads provided the initial impetus for urban life at the base of the



Hindu Kush.

There is neither archeological nor literary proof of any urbanization on the site of Čārīkār until the 10th/16th century. The name itself is unattested by medieval geographers, who mention only (H)ōpīān (or [H]ōfīān), a locality that still exists under that name, and Parwān (or Farwān, Barwān), the present Jabal al-Serāj, situated respectively 3 and 14 km north of Čārīkār (e.g., *Ḥodūd al-‘ālam*, tr. Minorsky, p. 112). According to a local tradition, Čārīkār was founded by one of the *mīrs* of Ōpīān, Mīr Sayyed Ja‘far, who is supposed to have supervised the construction of irrigation canals and the agricultural settlement of the plain (Sahāk, pp. 13f.; Nāhež, p. 30). It is only during the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (963-1014/1556-1605), however, that the first mentions of it are found, in the form Čārīk(ār)ān (*Akbar-nāma*, tr. Beveridge, see Index; and *Ā‘īn-e akbarī*, tr. Blochmann, I, p. 423).

The etymology of the name has been variously explained. According to popular tradition Čārīkār is derived from an original form *Čahār-yak(a)-kār (quarter-share of fruit). The modern, hypercorrective, form Čahārīkār is an echo of this tradition. It is difficult to accept this interpretation, however, for the element *čahār-yak(a)* is normally abridged as *čārak*, not as *čārīk*. A more satisfactory hypothesis has been suggested by A. S. Beveridge and reflects more closely the initial function of the town: “[T]he *Chār* in it may be Hindūstānī and refer to the permits-to-pass after tolls paid, given to caravans halted there for taxation” (p. 295 n.). Čārīkār did in fact have an octroi post until the beginning of the 20th century (Fakir Saiyid Iftikhar-ud-Din, p. 133; details on transit dues collected there are given in *Gazetteer of Afghanistan* VI, p. 132; see also Masson, 111, p. 126). Taken together this evidence suggests that the town was founded not as an agricultural colony but rather as a control point for commercial traffic and as a caravan station one full day’s camel journey (10 *farsaks*) from Kabul.

At the beginning of the 13th/19th century Čārīkār was described as a “flourishing” commercial town (Lord, p. 525) of several thousand inhabitants (10,000, according to Burnes, p. 151; more probably 3,000, as reported by Haughton), with a *bāzār* “about four hundred yards in length, and loosely covered to exclude heat” (Masson, III, p. 125).

During the first [Anglo-Afghan war](#) the city became the northernmost outpost for the British military forces in Afghanistan. In 1840 a barracks was constructed on its southern outskirts to house first a local militia (the



Kohestani Regiment), commanded by Lieutenant R. Maule, then, after May 1841, a regiment of 750 Gurkhas under the command of Captain Codrington. An embryonic civil administration was also established in June 1841 with the appointment of Major Eldred Pottinger (1811-43) as political agent for Kōhestān; he chose, however, to live at Laḡmānī, 4 km south of Čārīkār. The general uprising in Kōhestān soon necessitated a total evacuation of the British troops, beginning on 13 November 1841, after a determined ten-day siege (for all these events see Houghton and Pottinger, pp. 123ff.). In reprisal the town was sacked in October 1842 by a detachment of Major-General G. Pollock's "army of retribution" under the command of General J. McCaskill.

Čārīkār soon recovered, and it was in this highly strategic location that 'Abd-al-Raḡmān Khan, returning from exile in Russian Turkistan, proclaimed himself amir of Afghanistan (20 July 1880). From that time onward it is easier to follow the development of the town. Table 47 shows a long period of demographic stagnation followed by a rapid growth phase corresponding to the opening of the Sālang road and the increase in automobile traffic in Afghanistan. In these changed circumstances Čārīkār lost its traditional function as a caravan station. Even its urban structure was modified, with the shift of the commercial quarter toward this new major asphalted artery, which cut through the town from north to south: Today about a thousand shops are to be found in a new loose *bāzār* constructed on the plan of an asymmetrical cross; its liveliness contrasts with the sleepiness of the old *bāzār*, clustered farther east on the banks of a small stream. Of approximately 600 shops that the latter contained in about 1966 (Sahāk, p. 15) no more than 169 remained active in 1977, mostly craft workshops (Wiebe, p. 46).

The scale of the town's commercial facilities should not, however, lead to overestimation of their economic importance. In fact, the extent of Čārīkār's commercial influence is limited both by the proliferation of periodic rural *bāzārs* in Kōhdāman (Allan, p. 173) and by the proximity of Kabul, which is only an hour away by bus or taxi. In the 1970s traffic intensity between the two cities was unequaled in Afghanistan (1,200 vehicles a day in 1350 Š./1971-72, according to Kampsax, appendix 18), and laborers were commuting back and forth daily. In these circumstances it is not surprising that higher-order purchases are dominated by the capital, where the range of choice is far wider, whereas the *bāzār* of Čārīkār offers mainly lower-order goods (for daily consumption) and services directly connected with transit traffic (e.g., automobile repairs). The only real economic specialization is in handicrafts.



The proximity of small iron mines in the central Hindu Kush led to the establishment at a very early date of a small metal-manufacturing activity, which was at first directed toward horseshoe production (Masson, III, p. 125), then, after the turn of the 20th century, to cutlery (*čāqūsāzī*), for which the town rapidly acquired a great reputation (horn-handled knives, scissors, etc.; K. A., p. 20). Recently competition from imported industrial cutlery has caused a major reorientation toward manufacture and repair of agricultural equipment: In 1977 there were no more than sixteen workshops making cutlery, compared to 166 blacksmiths, seventy-nine of them specializing in agricultural implements. Furthermore, the use of scrap iron, partly purchased in Kabul, has entirely replaced that of iron ore from nearby mines. Textile manufacturing, which was very active at the beginning of this century, when Čārīkār produced cotton cloth (*karbās*) for the Afghan government (Fakir Saiyid Iftikhar-ud-Din, p. 133), seems never to have grown beyond the level of a home industry with looms scattered through the town and its environs. It suffered severely from the disappearance of cotton cultivation in the Kōhdāman and the establishment of industrial weaving mills at Golbahār and Jabal al-Serāj. Finally, the town boasts a bird market, which is particularly active during the period in the spring when large flocks of migratory birds fly over the region (Niethammer; Nogge and Niethammer).

Despite its tradition of handicraft Čārīkār has not become an industrial town. Although it does play a major role in the marketing of agricultural products from its rich hinterland, only a few small workshops for processing or simple preparation of raw materials have been located there: two tanneries and four units for drying grapes (Grötzbach, p. 57). On the other hand, the noncommercial service sector has become prominent. Čārīkār, already the chief town of a governorate under Dōst-Moḥammad Khan (r. 1235-79/1819-63; Masson, III, p. 126), is today the administrative center of the province of Parwān. It is also the principal city of a small (191 km²) but very densely populated district (108,000 inhabitants in the census of 1358 Š./1979). The town has been provided with municipal institutions since the mid-1930s (Sahāk, p. 16) and is also the headquarters of the Parwān Irrigation Project Authority. As for the social and educational sphere, there are about forty mosques, a hospital with thirty beds, a cinema (since 1333 Š./1954), and a unique educational infrastructure, established from 1299 Š./1929. In 1354 Š./1975 there were two twelve-grade comprehensive schools (one for boys, with 38 classes, 87 teachers, and 1,553 pupils; one for girls, with 17 classes, 33 teachers, and 768 pupils), four six-grade elementary schools (three for boys totaling 40



classes, 65 teachers, and 1,505 pupils; one for girls, with 9 classes, 15 teachers, and 320 pupils), and one teachers' training institute, with fourteen teachers and 114 students in 1362 Š./1983 (all other figures from Radojicic, 1975). The school population thus exceeded 4,100 pupils out of a total urban population of about 20,000, a clear indication of the town's influence on its hinterland.

Before 1980 Čārīkār and its environs constituted a popular weekend resort for the middle class of Kabul, especially in spring, when the lower slopes of the Paḡmān mountains are purple with flowering Judas trees (*arḡawān*, *Cercis griffithii*).

During warm weather the town also attracted a number of nomads, especially in autumn when the grape harvest increased opportunities for casual hire; according to the survey of nomads conducted in 1357 Š./1978, 300 families lived in the camps around the city, 265 of which consisted of non-pastoral service nomads belonging to eleven different tribal groups (principally the Sahāk, with fifty-seven families).

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