



DARDESTĀN I. GEOGRAPHY

i. GEOGRAPHY

The term Dardestān once described the extreme northwestern region of the Indian subcontinent, extending from Kashmir to Kabul (Emeneau). It is in this region that the Indic languages begin to merge with Southwestern Iranian *Darī* or Northeastern Iranian Pashto. The alleged eponym of the word Dard is Daradae (Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 5.9; Ptolemy, *Geography* 4.6.6; see ii, below). The terms Dardic or Dardestān are not, however, in common use in the region; rather, they were adopted by Western scholars after G. W. Leitner used them in his books in the late 19th century (1877, 1887, 1893, 1894, 1895). It has been suggested that *dard* may be a local word for “cave,” although other origins have also been given (Dani, pp. 112-15; see ii, below). Another common toponym for the region is Kōhestān, referring to the mountains along the upper Indus in the vale of Kashmir, Indus and Swat Kōhestān, Nūrestān, and Kabul Kōhestān (Jettmar, 1982; idem, 1983).

The geography of the Dardic languages has been described in great detail, with extensive bibliography, by Gérard Fussmann (I), though his treatment of Pashai (Pašāī), the most widely distributed Dardic language, is incomplete for the western reaches. The southern limit of its distribution is the Kabul river, and the extreme western outposts are hamlets in Estālef and villages in Qarābāg, on the western slopes of the Kōh-dāman valley adjacent to Kabul (Allan, 1974; idem, 1978).

In the time of the Mughal emperor Bābor (932-37/1526-30) Dardic languages



were more widespread, but they have retreated as Iranian languages have intruded, Pashto (see [AFGHANISTAN vi](#)) from the south, especially in the Pakistan sector of the region, and Afghan Persian (*Darī*) in the west. Pashto speakers, largely concentrated in the foothills, represent a powerful political force, and *Darī* is the predominant *bāzār* language around Kabul. There are scattered remnants of other languages, like Southeastern Iranian Parachi, found in Kabul Kōhestān, and [Burushaski](#) (Berger, 1985), found in Hunza and Nagar districts in northern Gilgit (Mueller-Stellrecht). Wakhi (*Wākī*), a mountain (Pamir) Tajik language, is found on the northern margins of Chitral and Gilgit districts (for others, see [CHITRAL ii](#)). In southern Indus Kōhestān, Hindki is a buffer between Punjabi/Pashto and the Dardic languages (Gankovskii).

As use of Dardic languages has declined, ethnonyms have shifted. In the west the residents of Kabul Kōhestān became Islamicized in the early 19th century, and Pashto speakers now call them Tajiks, after the Persian speakers across the Hindu Kush mountains in Central Asia, Kōhestānīs or Fārsiwāns (see [AFGHANISTAN iv](#)). Many former Pashai speakers have adopted the ethnonym Safi (Allan, 1978; Keiser) and often refer to themselves by the mountain valleys in which they live, for example, Panjšēr, Nejrāw, Tagāw, Laḡmān, [Darra-ye Nūr](#), and Peč (Grierson), whereas in Swat and Indus Kōhestān many former Dardic speakers now claim to be Pashtuns, though they speak Urdu. Karl Jettmar (1967) attributed a Central Asian origin to speakers of Dardic languages on the basis of their funerary rites and practices.

The toponym Dardestān is a social and political construct. Its currency toward the end of the 19th century in many ways reflected an attempt by supporters of imperial India to link the Indian northwestern frontier tracts to Kashmir, with which the British had treaties. Once Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had been defeated by William Gladstone in 1880, the British abandoned the “forward policy” of maintaining a British presence in the Kabul area. As a consequence the British created the modern entity of Afghanistan. In 1893 adoption of the Durand Line (see [BOUNDARIES iii](#)) fixed the limit of Kabul’s influence, and the homogeneous linguistic region implicit in the term Dardestān became obsolete.

See also [AFGHANISTAN v](#).



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