



HINDU KUSH

HINDU KUSH, the name given to the southwest range of the massive middle and south Asiatic mountain complex lying partly in Afghanistan and partly in Pakistan. The border with the Karakoram and the Hindu Raj is marked in the east by the deep saddle of the Baroghil (Bāruḡil) Pass (3,804 m) and the valleys of the Yarkun, Mastuj, and Chitral (q.v.), which run from there towards the southwest. In the north the Hindu Kush is separated from the mountains of northern Badakṣān by the valley of the Kokča and from the Pamir by the valley of the Panj or Āmu Daryā (q.v.). In the west the Hindu Kush stretches into the highlands of central Afghanistan, where the Shibar Pass and the deep gorge of Darra-ye Šekāri are to be seen as borders (Grötzbach, 1990, p. 241).

The name Hindu Kush is, from a historical point of view, quite young. It is missing from the accounts of the early Arab geographers and occurs for the first time in Ebn Baṭṭuṭa (ca. 1330; tr., p. 53; Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 350). Zāhir-al-Din Bābor's list of the Hindu Kush passes indicates that the name was restricted to the high mountain range north of Kabul, meaning the west Hindu Kush, over which important trade routes ran from India or Kabul to Qaṭaḡan or Turān (*Bābor-nāma*, foll. 130a-31a, 272b. tr. Beveridge, pp. 204-5, 485). Ebn Baṭṭuṭa sees the origin of the name Hindu Kush (Hindu-killer) in the fact that numerous Hindu slaves fell victim to the dangers of the unknown world of the high mountain range while crossing the pass on their way from India to Turkestan. Later the name spread to the east; in the 19th century it was used for the whole range up to the Baroghil Pass (Yule, p. LXII).

The Hindu Kush can be divided orographically into four parts (Grötzbach,



1990, pp. 241-42): (1) The western Hindu Kush between Darra-ye Šekāri and the Shibar Pass in the west and the Khawak (Kavāk) Pass in the east, that rises to a height of 5,126 m. (2) The middle or central Hindu Kush, which includes the main ridge and all of the numerous spurs between the Khawak Pass in the east and the Dorah (Durāh) Pass in the west and reaches heights up to 6,843 m. (3) The eastern Hindu Kush from the Dorah Pass to the Baroghil Pass, over whose main ridge the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan runs, with several peaks over 7,000 m. The highest point of the whole mountain range is Tirich Mir (7,706 m), on a side ridge jutting out into Chitral. (4) The K̄vāja Moḥammed Range, stretching with its various side ridges from the Khawak Pass north as far as Badaḳšān and is over 5,800 m high.

The mountain environment. In geological tectonic terms, the Hindu Kush is part of the young Eurasian mountain range complex, which has risen since the late Tertiary period. In the main it consists of metamorphic rocks (schist, gneiss, marble, etc.), but also of intrusives (granite, diorite, etc.) of varying age and size. The youth of the mountains can be seen in the frequent and sometimes severe earthquakes, particularly in Badaḳšān. The Hindu Kush also contains several mineral reserves, some of historical and some of contemporary importance. The lapis lazuli (lasurite) deposits in the area of Yamgān on the upper Kokča are renowned and have been mined since prehistoric times. The Arab geographers also mention silver mines in Panjšēr (Banjhir) and additional deposits of ruby, garnet, and rock crystal among others (Eṣṭakri, p. 280; Ebn Ḥawqal, p. 449, tr. Kramers and Wiet, pp. 334-35; Moqaddasi, pp. 303, 326; Yule; Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 350); today they have no economic value, however.

The climate of the Hindu Kush is marked by the transition from the west to the south Asiatic climatic type, that is, from the area with winter and spring rains to the area of summer monsoons. This can be seen in the natural vegetation. The south side of the mountains (Nuristan, south Chitral) lies on the fringe of the Indian summer monsoon, which has produced (sometimes thick) forest vegetation above a certain elevation. From about 1,300 to 2,300 m sklerophyllous forests are predominant with *Quercus* and *Olea* (wild olive); above that up to a height of about 3,300 m one finds coniferous forests with cedars, *Picea*, *Abies*, *Pinus*, and junipers. The north and northwest sides of the mountains receive less rain, which falls mainly in winter and spring. Here there are sparse juniper forests from around 1,500 m to 3,000 m. The inner valleys of the Hindu Kush are in the rain shadow and display desert vegetation



apart from surface-water shrubs along rivers and streams.

Above 5,000 to 5,500 m the Hindu Kush has glaciers, particularly on the northern slopes (shadow sides) of the peaks and ridges. The middle and eastern Hindu Kush, as well as the highest part of the K̄vāja Moḥammed mountains, are most glaciated. The glaciers represent here an important natural resource, providing water for irrigation and energy all year round. The rivers Chitral-Konar, Kokča, and Panj in particular are fed by glacial meltwater and still carry much water during the dry period in autumn.

The population and its ethnic composition. The Hindu Kush extends over an area of around 55,000 km², of which some 10,000 km² is in Pakistan. Ca. 1980 almost 1 million people lived in the whole area, including the bordering valleys, of which 200,000 were in the Pakistani section. This results in a population density of seventeen inhabitants per km² for the whole range. This average, however, obscures large regional differences. The population is concentrated in a number of main valleys (Chitral-Konar, Panjšēr, Andarāb, Varsaj-Farkār), but in some of the arid inner valleys there are as few as one or two inhabitants per km² (Korān, Monjān, Zēbāk). The population density reaches as many as several hundred inhabitants per km², however, in the agricultural areas, indicating the extent of over-population in the Hindu Kush.

The population of the Hindu Kush is strongly differentiated according to ethnicity, language, and religion. A generalizing overview may differentiate between three cultural areas, each of which is dominated by a different ethnic group:

The west, northwest, and north of the area is marked by Persian-speaking Tajiks and groups related to them (Mountain or Pamir Tajiks), who speak various northeast Iranian languages such as Munji/Monjāni, Eškāšemi (q.v.), Waḳi/Waḳāni, etc. (see AFGHANISTĀN v.). These small communities are Ismaʿili Shīʿites, whereas the Tajiks are Sunnites.

The south of the Hindu Kush is inhabited by Nuristanis and Pašais, who, particularly the former, are different from the other ethnic groups. The Nuristani languages form their own Indo-Iranian language group, whereas Pašai belongs to the Dardic languages. Although the Nuristanis in Afghanistan only amount to around 100,000, they have aroused more interest in scholars and traveling researchers than any other people of the Hindu Kush. This can be explained by the fact that they have retained many features of their



traditional, independent culture, having been annexed to the Afghan state only after the first winter campaign by Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān in 1895-96, which resulted in the compulsory conversion of the people to Sunni Islam (Kakar, pp. 181-209). The islamization of Nuristan brought a change in the usual name for the people and their country: the Kafirs (*kāfer* “unbeliever”) became Nuristanis, and Kafiristan (the land of unbelievers) became Nuristan (the land of light; see Bosworth, p. 409). The Kafirs practiced a religion in which belief in spirits and shamanism was subordinate to a pantheon reminiscent of that of the ancient Oriental cultures of west Asia (Degener; Jettmar et al., 1975, p. 464). Small groups of Kafirs who in 1896 fled into neighboring British India still live, together with Kalash, in a few valleys of lower Chitral close to the Afghan border. How far their culture is still alive, or alternatively petrified into touristic folklore, is difficult to judge.

In the Pakistani eastern Hindu Kush the Kho are the predominant population, who speak the Dardic language Khowar. They are mainly Sunnis, but a strong Isma‘ili minority exists in Upper Chitral.

Several other groups are present in addition to these three most important peoples: on the west and northwest rim of the mountains there are Persian-speaking, mostly Shi‘ite Hazāras and Sunni Turks, closely related to the Uzbeks of the foreland; the former have also settled in a few mountain valleys (Panjšēr, Kōst-o-Fereng, Andarāb). The simple construction of their farms and the insignificance of fruit cultivation show that these groups moved here in more recent times, before which they pursued a nomadic way of life. Small groups of Waḳi (from Waḳān, the upper course of the Panj or Āmu Daryā) have also moved to Upper Chitral, Hunza, and Tāšqorḡān (Sinkiang/Xinjiang; see Kreutzmann, pp. 83-129). Among the most recent population groups in the Afghan Hindu Kush are the Pashtun nomads, who received large mountain pastures from the Afghan government at the end of the 19th century, as well as the Gujars, who started moving up from formerly British India to the northwest edge of the Hindu Kush in the 1930s and occupied small ecological niches there.

Agriculture and worker migrations. Agriculture uses all of the available resources, which are very restricted in the high mountains. Where there is enough water for irrigation, the land is used intensively: the lower areas have rice (up to about 2000 m) and fruit, i.e., apricots, mulberries, apples, and walnuts (up to 2,400/2,500 m); up to the limit of cultivation (3,200/3,400 m) wheat, barley, and leguminous plants are grown. Cattle are also kept in



varying numbers on the high pastures up to the glaciers. They are of particular importance in the highest villages. The native farmers come into competition here with nomadic Pashtun sheep grazers for the summer pastures. The Tajiks, Kho, and Hazāra entrust the care of the cattle and the processing of the milk on the high pastures mainly to the women, whereas the Nuristani assign it to the men (Scheibe, ed., p. 132; Edelberg and Jones, p. 50; Grötzbach, 1972, p. 110).

Despite the high expenditure of labor, the agricultural production in many villages of the Hindu Kush is not enough to make them self-sufficient. The deficit has to be filled by other earnings and by buying food. Within the mountain area, however, non-agricultural trades hardly exist, for which reason temporary and seasonal work in the forelands is very common. This is particularly true of Panjšēr, Andarāb, and Varsaj in the Afghan Hindu Kush. The most important destinations of these migratory workers are Kabul and the oases of Qaṭaḡan in Afghanistan and Peshawar in Pakistan.

Traffic and settlements. The central and eastern Hindu Kush have only two passes (Dorah and Baroghil) that possessed any small significance for long-distance travel. The western Hindu Kush is much more easily traversable. This high, southwestern range of the inner Asian mountains renders it possible to cross the mountain barrier in relatively short but steep climbs and descents. Moreover, significant economic and cultural areas lie on either side, namely the Kabul basin with the regions Kōh Dāman and Kohistan (Kuhestān) in the south and the oases of Qaṭaḡan (Ġōri, Baḡlān, Qonduz, Kānābād) in the north. For this reason most of the long-distance trade between India and Turan/Bactria went over the passes of the western Hindu Kush or on the Bāmiān-Balk route somewhat farther west. In times of weak government the local population took over control of the traffic and entrances to the passes (Panjšēr, Ġorband, Sālang, Anda-rāb), which led to its reduction due to rising insecurity. Ebn Hawqal (p. 449, tr. Kramers and Wiet, p. 435) called the Panjšēri stupid and corrupt, a reputation that followed them deep into the 19th century (Wood, p. 276). It was only under the Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān (r. 1880-1901) that the passes were made safe and the routes over the Khawak Pass through the Panjšēr valley, and over the Sālang and Shibar Pass, acquired new significance. In 1933 the first motor road over the Hindu Kush was opened, crossing the mountains at the Shibar Pass (2,936 m). This and the Sālang Road, a peak tunnel (3,337 m) opened in 1964, brought about a complete shift in the traffic over the Hindu Kush. Thereafter the transit traffic



was concentrated on the new road, whereas the other passes crumbled or retained a merely local significance. The traffic system was changed once again by the Afghan civil war (1978-2001) and the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan. Many previously abandoned side roads were reactivated by the Mojāhedīn, and a roadway has even been laid between Chitral and Zēbāk in Badakṣhān over the Dorāh Pass.

The settlements of the Hindu Kush are almost completely rural in character, but show clear regional differences in construction and arrangement. Characteristic for Nuristan and south Chitral, where there are large wood resources, is a kind of timber frame house. In the rest of the Hindu Kush stone houses (fewer clay houses) are the rule. In the southern Hindu Kush, but also in other parts of the mountains, many villages outside the irrigated land are positioned on the slope of the valley in such a way that the roof of a lower-lying house functions as the terrace of the one above. In the Sālang valley many villages and hamlets are built like a fortress onto the slope. Also like forts are the seats of the old country aristocracy, which are often isolated farms. Although the style of settlement in the Hindu Kush is loose, individual houses are rather rare and mostly recent, that is, since the pacification of the land under Amir ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān or the British occupation (Grötzbach, 1972, p. 246; Haserodt, 1989, p. 90; Kussmaul, p. 29).

A remarkable feature of the settlement structure is the amount of seasonal settlements, the number of which increases with the altitude. Villages that are inhabited the whole year occur in isolated instances up to an altitude of about 3,300 m. Then there are summer settlements on the high-lying summer pastures, spring and autumn settlements that are inhabited for sowing and harvest on the remote mountain fields, and winter villages, that are completely abandoned in the summer. Moreover, there are the black tents of the Pashtun nomads on their summer pastures. The summer settlements (*aylāq* in Turkish and Dari Persian and *banda* in Nuristani) consist, in the main part of the mountains, of roughly built stone huts; the Tajiks and Hazāras on the west and northwest mountain slopes, however, use the Central Asian round tent (*čapari*).

Real towns are completely non-existent in the Hindu Kush. Even the largest urban settlements such as Chitral Town (11,000 inhabitants) have partly rural features; the irrigated fields often begin behind the shop fronts of the *bāzārs*. Most small *bāzār* locations in the area were only built in the 20th century and have no urban character.



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