

# WAKHAN: THE HOMELAND OF WAKHI COMMUNITY

Dr. Nadeem Shafiq Malik

From the view of a satellite's camera, Afghanistan looks like 'an irregularly-shaped leaf' attached by a thin stem to China.<sup>1</sup> This narrow finger of land, consisting of alpine valleys and high mountains is the Wakhan Corridor, now the Wakhan district of the north eastern Afghan province of Badakhshan. Considered as 'the safest place in Afghanistan,'<sup>2</sup> the Corridor borders Pakistan to the south, Tajikistan to the north and China to the east.<sup>3</sup>

The Wakhan Corridor is between 20 km to 60 km broad (north to south) and more than 200 km long (east to west) covering an area of about 10300 km.<sup>4</sup> Some of the tallest mountain ranges of the world like Hindukush, Karakoram, Kunlun and Tien Shan meet in this territory and create the important watersheds like Tarim basin, Amu Darya drainage and Indus Channel.<sup>5</sup> Two important rivers of the area, the Pamir and the Sarhad, spring from the high plateau land of Wakhan which is named as *Bam-i-Dunya* (Roof of the world) by the locals.<sup>6</sup>

The climate of Wakhan district is arid and precipitation is normally low between six and twelve centimeters.<sup>7</sup> The soil is quite poor and it is hard to cultivate any thing in large quantities. Being at high altitude<sup>8</sup> and 1700 Km away from the sea, winters are very severe and temperature remains below zero for most of the year and can even go below -50C. Contrary to that, summers are quite brief and temperature can rise up till 30C.<sup>9</sup>

Prior to civil war in Afghanistan, Wakhan was known for its biodiversity and preservation of high altitude wildlife. Even today, at least eight species of large mammals including snow leopard, ibex, brown bears and Marco Polo sheep are found in the region.<sup>10</sup> The area is also rich in lapis lazuli, 'the rare, bright blue semi-precious stone' which is highly valued for its antiquity.<sup>11</sup> Earlier to Soviet

invasion, the region was a big attraction for the mountaineers and adventure travelers which came to a halt during the civil war. Now the tourists are turning again to the Wakhan area to appreciate 'its stunningly beautiful wilderness'.<sup>12</sup>

Since the seventh century, Wakhan was regularly mentioned by early Chinese travelers like Hiuen Tsang in their chronicles.<sup>13</sup> The Arab scholars like Istahri and Ibn Rusta also mentioned Wakhan in their writings and earlier Persian geographical works like *Hudud al-Alam* described it in detail.<sup>14</sup> Famous European traveler Marco Polo also passed through Wakhan during his journey to China describing it 'a country of no great size, for it is three days journey across every way'.<sup>15</sup>

From the early times, Wakhan Corridor remained 'a highway of trade and communication' and had been used for traveling between the settled areas of northern Afghanistan like Balkh and Chinese Turkistan.<sup>16</sup> In the following centuries, although modest but a regular flow of trade continued passing through Wakhan which was a source of revenue for the local chiefs who levied taxes on the trade caravans passing through their territories.<sup>17</sup>

Until 1883, Wakhan was a principality on both banks of the Upper Amu River. It was governed by a hereditary chieftain, known as Mir who controlled all area in which Wakhi sedentary mountain farmers and Kirghiz nomads lived. Both communities paid taxes and tributes in cash as well as in kind to Mir and also rendered services for him as load carriers and soldiers.<sup>18</sup> In 1883, the Mir of Wakhan, Ali Mardan Khan<sup>19</sup> managed a preventive migration of his family to Chitral in view of the raid of Amir Abdur Rahman, ruler of Afghanistan on Wakhan.<sup>20</sup> One quarter of his subjects also followed him. Later, after consolidation of power by Amir Abdur Rahman in the area, Wakhan was divided in two parts. The northern part was controlled by Russia while the southern part was managed by the Amir of Afghanistan.<sup>21</sup>

Wakhan gained much fame during the nineteenth century in context of 'Great Game' being played by Russia and Britain in Central Asia.<sup>22</sup> It led to extensive geographical research in the Pamirs which was largely motivated by Imperial interests of the two rival empires.<sup>23</sup> For instance, John Wood, who was in the service of the East India Company, visited Wakhan and adjoining areas during the years 1836-38 and recorded his observations regarding acute poverty, remoteness, internal strife and slave-trade prevalent in the region.<sup>24</sup> He also prepared a map of the region which was used as the basic document during future Russo-British negotiations to delimit

boundaries in Pamirs. In fact, the demarcation of Wakhan followed the line of Wood's journey to the source of the Oxus'.<sup>25</sup>

Wood was followed by Montgomerie who recorded in 1868 that area between Kabul and Wakhan was in a 'very lawless condition'.<sup>26</sup> In 1874, Douglas Forsyth dispatched the Wakhan Mission from Yarkand which surveyed Wakhan region and their report laid concrete grounds for delineation of the frontier between Russia, Afghanistan and British India some twenty years later.<sup>27</sup> In 1890, Francis Younghusband of the British India Staff College also visited Wakhan and noticed Russian presence there.<sup>28</sup>

In 1893, the Anglo-Russian and Russo-Afghan frontier differences in the Pamirs led to a series of negotiations between all concerned for a permanent demarcation of the boundaries.<sup>29</sup> During those discussions, Amir Abdur Rahman threatened to withdraw from Wakhan, however, the British who wanted to keep Russians as far away as possible, offered to pay a special annual subsidy of Rs.50,000/- on which he agreed to retain the valley.<sup>30</sup> From the demarcation of the Afghan Frontier (1895-96), Wakhan formed a political buffer between Russian Turkistan, British India, and China.<sup>31</sup> Thus the British decision-makers were relieved that now nowhere did the frontiers of British India and Russia touch and above all, there was now 'an officially agreed frontier beyond which Russia could not advance except in the time of war'.<sup>32</sup>

The tight control of Russian frontiers after the Soviet Revolution of 1917 put an end to use of that area for traditional Silk Road trade. However, trade between northern Afghanistan and Chinese Turkistan continued.<sup>33</sup> After the communist victory in China in 1949, the trade with Chinese Turkistan was also stopped, thus putting an end to 'a highway of trade and cultural exchange', which had served the humanity for more than 2000 years.<sup>34</sup> The Wakhan corridor regained importance during the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan as Russians built two military camps, one signal intelligence post and several missile sites in the area. Naturally, Pakistan was much concerned about those developments, especially installation of 'sophisticated ballistic missiles' as according to a contemporary defense analyst, 'Wakhan has become a wedge which can disturb the existing alignments'.<sup>35</sup>

After the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban movement gained control of the country but Wakhan region remained outside of its sphere of influence mainly due to its inaccessibility and remoteness.<sup>36</sup> However, it faced the economic effects of the civil war (1997-2001) as it was completely cut off from rest of the country and the international borders were also sealed.

Consequently, the area was driven into a state of 'sever economic deprivation 'forcing it to depend solely on its indigenous meagre agro-pastoral economy'.<sup>37</sup>

The Wakhan region is inhabited by several communities.<sup>38</sup> However, two major ethnic groups i.e. Wakhi and Kyrgyz formed the major part of the area's population which has been estimated around 14000 souls. The Wakhis formed the majority and their number is about 12,000 persons which mostly live in 39 villages in the valley bottom between Ishkashem and Sarhad-e-Boroghil. On the other hand, the Kirghiz have been numbered about 1400 persons who mostly live in the high altitude area of Pamir. On the average, each household has 11 persons while half of the population is below 16 years old.<sup>39</sup> Besides these two ethnic communities, a small number of administrative personals and traders also live in the area that belong to several ethnic and linguistic groups of Afghanistan including Pushtuns, Uzbeks and Tajiks.<sup>40</sup>

The Wakhis are Ismaili Muslims<sup>41</sup> whose ancestors centuries ago migrated from Iran. They are basically agriculturists and grow wheat, barley, peas, potatoes and other crops besides maintaining some livestock and also work as manual labourers.<sup>42</sup> The Kirghiz are Sunni Muslims and are basically livestock herders, maintaining sheep, goats, yaks, horses, Bactrian camels and donkeys. They move along with their livestock between summer and winter pastures at least three times a year.<sup>43</sup> Generally, Kirghiz are healthier and wealthier than the Wakhis.<sup>44</sup> They also have unconcealed contempt to Wakhis;<sup>45</sup> but they maintain working relationship as the Kirghiz want grain and the Wakhis need livestock which is bartered among them.<sup>46</sup>

All the Wakhis do not belong to a common ancestral background. They came from six different divergent agnatic-descent groups including Sayyed, Khuja, Mir, Shaana, Khyberis and Kheek.<sup>47</sup> Sayyed and Khuja claim direct descent from the Prophet of Islam [SAW] and are called by the prestigious titles like shah (monarch) and pir (spiritual leader). Both groups provide spiritual leadership to semi-hereditary disciples from rest of the community.<sup>48</sup> Mirs are the successors of the former Wakhi chieftains and feudal lords who still own large tracts of land although with little political influence.<sup>49</sup> Shaana are the off springs of those male members of the Mir family who married with common Wakhi women while Khyberis are scion of the courtiers of former Mirs.<sup>50</sup> The common Wakhis are called Kheek who form the largest group in the community.<sup>51</sup> Sayyads, Khujas and Mirs are considered of 'high blood' while Shaana, Khyberis and Kheek are thought of 'common blood'.<sup>52</sup>

The Wakhi struggle hard to 'live a hand-to-mouth existence' and put their children to work in the wheat fields as young as three.<sup>53</sup> Wakhan's high altitude coupled with little medical facilities<sup>54</sup>, scarce utilities, low nutrition and absence of education has led to spare health care system.<sup>55</sup> The number of opium-addicted Wakhis is also on the rise as being 'impoverished, disease-ridden, and weather-beaten, they depend heavily on opium to reduce the impacts of cold, illness and hard living conditions'.<sup>56</sup>

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

- 
- <sup>1</sup> Quoted in Amin Saikal and Willam Maley, ed., *The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p.18.
- <sup>2</sup> Aryn Baher, "The Wakhan Corridor," *Time*, April 24, 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> M. Nazif Mohib Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan: Adaptation to Closed Frontiers* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1979), p.3. According to Kreutzmann, these territories have been separated since the late nineteenth century by international boundaries which were demarcated as a 'result of the Imperial Great Game'. For details, see Hermann Kreutzmann, "Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamir Knot: Survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a Harsh Environment and Global Context," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.169, Issue 3, (September 2003), pp.215-235.
- <sup>4</sup> *Afghanistan Wakhan Mission Technical Report* (Geneva: UNEP, 2003), p.3.
- <sup>5</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.3.
- <sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.8, 13.
- <sup>8</sup> The entire Wakhan district is above 2,500 meters altitude. The valley is about 3,500 meters high while mountains bordering at South are 7000 meters high. Quoted in Aunohita Mojumdar, "Killing Fields of Wakhan," *The Hindu*, December 2, 2007.
- <sup>9</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.13.
- <sup>10</sup> Charudutt Mishra and Anthony Fitzherbert, "War and Wildlife: A Post-Conflict Assessment of Afghanistan's Wakhan Corridor," *Oryx*, Vol. 38, (2004), pp.102-105.
- <sup>11</sup> [http://64.4.22.250/cgi-bin/gestmsg/Wakhan History% 2<sup>d</sup> aizi% 2ehm? Emsg=MSG 116641](http://64.4.22.250/cgi-bin/gestmsg/Wakhan%20History%20aizi%202htm?Emsg=MSG116641). (accessed on December 19, 2006).
- <sup>12</sup> Now the Agha Khan Foundation has launched a programme to train the locals as guides and also helped them to set up simple guests houses in the area. As a result, about 260 tourists visited the area during 2006-2007. For details, see Aunohita Mojumdar, "Afghanistan Gets Ready for Tourists," *Aljazeera*. NET, January 02, 2008.
- <sup>13</sup> V. Minorsky, "Wakhan," *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, Vol. IV, (London: Lazac & Co, 1934), p.1103 ; Syed Abdul Quddus, *The North-West Frontier of Pakistan* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1990), pp.253-54.
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

- 
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p. 26. Even today, it takes just four days to traverse the entire valley. Quoted in Aryn Baker, "Best Place to Escape the Office: The Wakhan Corridor," *Time*, May 5, 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> V. Minorsky, "Wakhan," p.1103.
- <sup>17</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.30.
- <sup>18</sup> For details, see *ibid.*, pp.28-30.
- <sup>19</sup> For a brief life sketch of Ali Mardan Khan, see Inyatullah Faizi, *Wakhan: A Window into Central Asia* (Islamabad: Al-Qalam, 1996), pp.140-141.
- <sup>20</sup> For background of Amir Abdul Rahman's raid on Badakshan and Wakhan, see Andre Singer, *Lords of the Khyber: The Story of the North West Frontier* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd., 1984), pp.144-151.
- <sup>21</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.31.
- <sup>22</sup> It has been observed that British spies in Wakhan disguised themselves as scholars, explorers, merchants and Muslim holy men and played 'cat and mouse' with the Russian agents during the Great Game. Quoted in "Through the Valley of Blood", *The Herald, Glasgow*, April 18, 1998. <http://w3.nexis.com/new/delivery/Print.Doc>. (accessed on February 15, 2007).
- <sup>23</sup> The prominent travelers /researchers included John Wood, (1841), T.E. Gordon (1876), J.L. Jawarskij (1885), C.A. Dunmore (1893), O. Olufsen (1904), A. A. Bobrinskiy (1908), and A. J. Synesreff (1909). For their works, see John Wood, *A Personal Narrative of a Journey to the Source of the River Oxus by the Route of the Indus, Kabul and Badakhsban* (London: John Murray, 1841); T.E. Gordon, *The Roof of the World: Being the Narrative of a Journey over the High Plateau of Tibet to the Russian Frontier and the Oxus Sources on Pamir* (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1876); J. L. Joworskiy, *Reise der Russischen Gesandts – Chast in Afghanistan and Buchara in den Jahren, 1878-79* [Journey of the Russian Embassy to Afghanistan and Bukhara during 1878-79] (Jena: Costenoble, 1885); Earl of Murray CA Dunmore, *The Pamirs : Being a Narrative of a Year's Expedition on Horseback and on Foot Through Kashmir, Western Tibet, Chinese Tartary, and Russian Central Asia*, 2 Vols (London: John Murray, 1893); O Olufsen, *Through the Unknown Pamirs: The Second Dutch Pamir Expedition, 1898-1899* (London: William Heinemann, 1904); A. A. Bobrinskiy, *Gortsy Verkhover Pyandzha* [Mountain Dwellers of the Upper Pyandzha Valley] (Moscow: A. A. Leverson, 1908); and A. J. Synesreff, ed., *Eastern Bokhara : A Secret Collection of Geographical, Topographical and Statistic Material Concerning Asia* (Simla: Government of India, 1909). It may be pointed out that the almost entire knowledge about the Pamirs at the end of the nineteenth century was compiled by Lord Curzon in his three piece treatise published in 1896. This document, which highlighted the remoteness, harsh living conditions and geographical feature of the region, paved the way for formulation of British diplomacy about the Pamirs. For its text, see G. N. Curzon, "The Pamirs and the Source of the Oxus," *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.8, pp.15-54, 97-119, 239-64.
- <sup>24</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, pp.28-30.
- <sup>25</sup> John Keay, *When Men and Mountains Meet* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1993), p.159.
- <sup>26</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.31.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p.33; Algeron Duran, *The Making of a Frontier* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.4.
- <sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.35-36. According to a report, Russian Cossacks had even crossed into the Ishkoman valley of Yasin and crossed the Darkot and Baroghil passes back to Wakhan. For details, see John Keay, *The Gilgit Game: The Explorers of the Western Himalayas, 1865-95* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p.211.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p.36-37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> "Wakhan," *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 2006), Vol.12,p-236.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: On Secret Service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 2006), p.499. Earlier, on June 17, 1809, Britain and Afghanistan had entered into an agreement pledging that Persia and France would not be allowed to enter India through Afghanistan. Quoted in Khawaja Hameed Yazdani, *Kashmir ki Farokht: Tarikhi Dastawaizat* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 1990), p.16.

<sup>33</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.41.

<sup>34</sup> Mike Edwards, "The Adventures of Marco Polo", *National Geographic*, May 1, 2001, p.6.

<sup>35</sup> D. Shah Khan, "Wakhan in Historical and Political Setting", *Regional Studies*, Vol. IV, No.2 (Spring 1986), p.50.

<sup>36</sup> Aunokita Mojumdar, "Afghanistan Gets Ready for Tourists", *Aljazeera.net*. January 2, 2008. (accessed on March 9, 2008).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> In fact, the entire population of Afghanistan has been divided into "myriad ethnic, linguistic, religious, kin-based and regional groupings". For details, see Richard F. Nyrop and Donald M. Seekins, eds., *Afghanistan: A Country Study* (Washington D. C: American University, 1986), pp.1-15.

<sup>39</sup> Wakhan Development Partnership, *Wakhan Area & People* (London: Wakhan Development Partnership, 2007), p.3. <http://www.wakhandev.org.uk>.

<sup>40</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>41</sup> However, according to a study, some Twelver Shia and Sunni Wakhis also exist. Richard F. Nyrop and Donald M. Seekins, eds., *Afghanistan: A Country Study*, p.24.

<sup>42</sup> "Afghanistan: Community Conservation in the Wakhan," [http://www.wcs.org/globalconservation/Asia\\_Copy/Afghanistan/](http://www.wcs.org/globalconservation/Asia_Copy/Afghanistan/) (accessed on September 5, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> Mark Jenkins, "A Short Walk in the Wakhan Corridor," *Outside Magazine*, November 2005, p.25.

<sup>45</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p. 45.

<sup>46</sup> Mark Jenkins, "A Short Walk in the Wakhan Corridor," p.25. After the Soviet-inspired communist *coup* of April 1978 in Afghanistan, the Kirghiz were among the first refugees to migrate to the Northern Pakistan. They fled in August 1979, that is, within four months after the *Khalqi coup d'etat*, as they immediately recognized the *Khalqis* as a communist threat. There they spent four hard years (1972-82) and then eventually re-settled in the eastern Turkey. However, the Wakhi community remained in the Wakhan district and did not oppose the Soviet backed government in any way. For details, see *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol.63, No.3, (August, 2004), p.796.

<sup>47</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, pp.55-57.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* According to an estimate, the vast majority of the Wakhi people i.e. more than 95% belong to a common background. Quoted in Herman Kreutzmann,

“Ethnic Minorities and Marginality in the Pamirian Knot: Survival of Wakhi and Kirghiz in a Harsh Environment and Global Context,” *The Geographical Journal*, Vol.169, No.3 (September 2003), p.219.

- <sup>53</sup> Kate Mansey, “From Sussex to Kabul,” *Sunday Mirror*, October 14, 2007.
- <sup>54</sup> Reportedly, there is only one clinic in the entire Wakhan Corridor and even it is ten days donkey ride away from the farthest villages in the area. Quoted in Robert Lindsay, “Ossama Bin Laden on Top of the World,” <https://w3.nexis.com/new/delivery/PrintDoc>. (accessed on February 15, 2007.)
- <sup>55</sup> Aunokita Mojumdar, “Wakhan Corridor”, *HIMALA: South Asian*, Vol.21, No.5, (May 2008), p.39.
- <sup>56</sup> Shahrani, *The Kirghiz and Wakhi of Afghanistan*, p.79. Also see Aunokita Mojumdar, “Killing Fields of Wakhan,” *The Hindu*, December 2, 2007. It may be noted that opium is not locally produced in Wakhan. In fact, it is mainly produced in the province of Badakhshan but mostly consumed in Wakhan. Moreover, Wakhan has also become a transit route for opium trafficking between Afghanistan and Central Asian republics.