

assumes. The whole country is sad and desolate—a region to be shunned by those who have dwelt in a happier land.

“So far as the surface of the Persian plateau has been surveyed,” wrote Blanford, thirty years ago, “it consists of a number of isolated plains of varying extent and elevation above the sea, all without any outlet, and separated from each other by ranges of hills, frequently of considerable height. The lowest portion of each of these plains is generally a salt lake or marsh. If there be a lake its level often fluctuates, and one or two seasons of deficient rainfall suffice to lay bare the greater portion of its bed, or to convert it into a marsh. Rivers are few in number and singularly small in volume; in fact, not the least striking feature of the country consists in their paucity or absence. The whole of Persia, except near the shores of the Caspian and on the western slopes of the Zagros, is, in fact, a desert, and all cultivated oases owe their fertility to irrigation from springs or from the small streams fed by the rain or snow of winter.” Such streams are so rare, however, that Colonel Gore, as Sykes relates (p. 40), rode 400 miles from the Heri Rud to Hur, near Kirman, without seeing a single stream of flowing water.

Yet even in Eastern Persia, the worst part of the country, there is another side to the picture. Among the mountains which border the basins, springs and little streams support small villages, where green fields and flourishing orchards drive away the thought of the desert for a while. Sad experience has taught the people to utilize the underground water by means of “kanats,” long underground channels, which start deep underground at the foot of the mountains and gradually approach the surface, bringing water far out into the plains. Where the mountains are high and provide water for numerous “kanats” the plains are well dotted with villages, and even support cities. All of the few rivers are utilized for irrigation, and in Sistan the waters of the Helmund support scores and perhaps hundreds of villages.

In such a country the conditions of life are extremely hard. Strange as it may seem, when the average population is less than 10 to the square mile the country is overpopulated. There are thousands upon thousands of square miles of fine-soiled plain which would be highly fertile if only they could be supplied with water. Everywhere the cry goes up for water, and there is no water. In Western Persia conditions are better, but throughout the basin region of the center and east every drop of water from above ground and below is utilized, and a scarcity of winter snow to stock the mountains means gaunt famine. The distribution of population illustrates this. Harbors, trade routes, facilities for manufacturing, and the like are of secondary importance in determining the location of cities. The primary consideration is water. Where water is abundant large cities are almost sure to grow up, if other conditions are in the least favorable. Accordingly the large cities of Persia are situated close to lofty mountains. As a rule, the density of population is in direct proportion to the height of the mountains. Sistan appears to be an exception, but, after all, its abundant population is a response to the tremendous mountains of Hindu Kush. The response is far from the cause, because the intervening space can not be cultivated.