

It is difficult to judge now, when the whole tract is slowly recovering from the results of long-continued aggression, what its population and resources may have been during periods when the support of a strong paramount power, established in Eastern Turkestan, assured to Sarikol safety from its predatory neighbours to the west and south. The political value of this hill tract as an advanced post guarding the frontier towards Badakhshān, Gilgit, and the Pāmirs was, as we shall see, realized early by the Chinese. But far more than the spasmodic assertion of sovereignty, which, as far as the Chinese administration was concerned, is likely to have been often purely nominal⁸, the racial tenacity of the inhabitants themselves must have helped to preserve to the little alpine chiefship its continued existence and historical individuality.

The population of Sarikol, apart from the nomadic Kirghiz herdsmen who visit its grazing grounds, consists of hill Tājiks, who by physical appearance and language alike are unmistakably proved to belong to the so-called Galcha stock. The Sarikolī tongue, first recorded by the late Mr. R. Shaw with his usual accuracy and care, is very closely allied to Wakhī, the language of Wakhān, of which it may be said to represent a mere dialect. The Sarikolis whom I saw showed all the racial characteristics of the Īrānian 'Tājiks' who form the bulk of the population in the Oxus region⁹, and the knowledge of Persian common among all classes indicates the influence exercised by the culture of Īrān even in these distant valleys. To the prevalence of Īrānian traditional lore in the local legends I shall have occasion to refer later. The antiquity of these legends, as attested by Hsüan-tsang, the Īrānian elements in the local nomenclature, as well as the absence of any historical tradition to the contrary, render it highly probable that the population of Sarikol has from early times borne the same ethnic character as at present.

Ethnic
affinity of
Sarikolis.

The geographical position of Sarikol is such that it could never have lain on the route of one of those great waves of invasion which from time to time have swept across the more accessible parts of Central Asia, and in their progress have radically changed the ethnology of those regions. Sarikol, with its severe climate¹⁰—the elevation of the main valleys sinks nowhere below 10,000 ft.—and its limited area of productive land, could not possibly attract occupation and settlement by a powerful invader. The predatory inroads to which the main valleys were exposed, during recurring periods, from the petty hill-states to the south and west, no doubt subjected the more peaceable population of Sarikol to great vicissitudes. But considering the passing character of these raids, and the ready shelter offered by the many secluded side-valleys, they were not likely to threaten it with extermination. Experience in any case shows that the Sarikolī settlements during recent times have recovered from severe trials of this kind, including even a forcible transportation of the greater part of the population to Kāshgar, which occurred during Yāqūb Bēg's rule¹¹. It is manifest that this small Īrānian community, placed in such close proximity to a great Turkī-speaking population, and sharing its political fortunes, could not have preserved its language and racial characteristics intact without the isolating effect of its mountains and that tenacious attachment to inherited lore which is peculiar to hill people.

Ethnic in-
dividuality
of Sarikol.

⁸ The relations which existed during the period preceding Yāqūb Bēg's rebellion between the hereditary chief of Sarikol and the Chinese authorities were characteristically indicated in the nominal tribute paid by the former and the valuable presents received in return. The payments in silver and gold made to the Sarikol chief were represented 'as a subsidy for the military protection of the frontier and the road towards Badakhshān'; see Gordon, *Roof of the World*, p. 110.

⁹ For a photograph see *J. Anthr. Inst.*, 1903, Pl. XXVII, where the individuals in the back row and the central figure

in the front row are Wakhīs settled in Sarikol, the rest Kirghiz. Wakhīs and Sarikolis proper are not distinguishable in outward appearance.

¹⁰ The character of the climate of Sarikol is well indicated by the saying which Col. T. E. Gordon recorded from the mouth of its governor at the time of his visit 'that there are only two seasons, summer and winter, the former lasting three months, the latter nine'; *Roof of the World*, p. 114.

¹¹ See Gordon, *Roof of the World*, p. 111.