

orders, had endeavoured to utilize the water supply available in the Vash-shahri River for the creation of a small oasis which would serve to facilitate and develop traffic on the route between Charchan and Charklik. The strategic and commercial importance of this ancient route had manifestly appealed to the keen topographical sense of the rulers; but the execution of their order had been no easy task.

The three sons of Kepek, the original settler from Keriya, who first took up land here some thirty years before, had indeed kept to their little colony and prospered. But the destitute agriculturists whom successive Ambans had tried to attract to the new settlement from distant oases by advances of food, seed-corn, etc.—by fair promises, too, as well as by the application of some gentle pressure—had in almost all cases decamped whenever the harvest did not come up to their expectations, or the question of refunding advances arose. With the keen competition for agricultural labour going on all along the widely scattered oases in the east of the Tarim Basin, there was little chance of detaining such roving folk at an outlying place like Vash-shahri. At the time of my passage some twenty families had been brought there by the 'Beg' who had last contracted for this official 'development scheme.' But feeling little confidence in the permanency of the human material supplied, he had taken the sensible course of investing some of the grant received in 'bricks and mortar.' The building of a rest-house, granary, and Bazar would serve as a most effective official 'eye-wash' and allow his patron, the Amban of Charklik, to send great reports of colonizing achievements to headquarters at Ak-su and Urumchi.

However this may be, I felt as grateful as did my men for what comforts in the way of shelter and supplies Vash-shahri could offer. The most useful of the latter was a stout ox-hide from which to prepare fresh soles for those of the camels whose feet had been worn sore by the hard salt-encrusted ground encountered along the old inundation beds of the Charchan River. The new soles, alas, had to be sewn on to the live skin of the poor beasts' foot-pads—