

CHAPTER II

SARĪKOL AND THE ROUTE TO KĀSHGAR

SECTION I.—THE GEOGRAPHICAL POSITION AND ETHNOGRAPHY OF SARĪKOL

Meeting of ethnic areas near Kilik Pass.

THE great alpine valley of the Tāghdumbāsh Pāmīr, to which I crossed on the 29th of June, 1900, over the Kilik Pass (15,800 feet above the sea, Fig. 8), was certain to prove interesting ground from more than one point of view. At its head I was close to the point where the drainage areas of the three great river systems of the Indus, the Oxus, and the Tārīm meet, the representatives as it were of the still greater ethnic areas of India, Īrān, and Turkeṣtān. That the view from the height of the Khushbēl Peak, my first survey station, simultaneously comprised the confines of British India, Afghānistān, Russia, and China, was the best illustration of the abiding influence which geographical facts must exercise over political developments even in this desolate region. The wide expanse of level or easily undulating grazing land which the same view disclosed at the bottom of the Tāghdumbāsh Valley, formed a striking contrast to the rocky and almost impassable gorges of Hunza, and could not fail to impress me at the outset with the advantages for communication which the Pāmīrs offer, notwithstanding their elevation and severe climate. But it was only in the light of subsequent observations, gathered on my marches along the whole length of the Tāghdumbāsh Pāmīr from the Wakhjīr Pass and the Oxus source down to Tāsh-kurghān, that I fully realized the historical interest of the route which leads through this valley.

Position of Tāghdumbāsh Pāmīr.

In order to explain the importance which may be claimed for the Tāghdumbāsh Pāmīr as an early line of communication between Chinese Turkeṣtān and the Oxus Valley, it is not necessary to consider the historical topography of the whole Pāmīr region. Lord Curzon, in his justly famous memoir on 'The Pamirs and the source of the Oxus', has furnished a lucid and critical summary of that much-discussed subject, and to it the reader may be referred with confidence for information on all general questions¹. An important geographical fact, aptly recognized in Lord Curzon's analysis², helps to limit the scope of our inquiry. The Tāghdumbāsh Pāmīr, though it shares the designation and also, in its upper portion, the main physical characteristics of the other Pāmīrs, lies in a different watershed from the rest, and is thus plainly marked as part of a different system. We find this physical division emphasized at the present day by the political boundaries, which leave the Tāghdumbāsh the only Pāmīr under Chinese jurisdiction, and we may safely attribute to it a determining influence upon the earlier historical conditions of this mountain tract.

Importance of Tāghdumbāsh route.

While all the other Pāmīrs are situated within the drainage area of the Oxus, the waters of the Tāghdumbāsh Pāmīr discharge themselves eastwards into the great Turkeṣtān Basin.

¹ Reprinted from the *Geographical Journal*, 1896; for an analysis of early travellers' routes see in particular pp. 63 sqq.

² See *The Pamirs*, p. 19.