

*Robert Middleton*

### **Education and mobility - A historical perspective<sup>1</sup>**

The Pamirs have, since time immemorial, been a crossroads of various civilisations. Few have, however, left a lasting mark. The Wakhan and possibly the Ghunt valleys were familiar to Silk Road travellers on their way to the 'Stone Tower' mentioned by Ptolemy.<sup>2</sup> Early Chinese Buddhist pilgrims and seventeenth century Jesuit missionaries also passed through the Pamirs; there are legendary accounts of visits by Ismaili saints and missionaries such as Shoh Khomoush, Shoh Burhon, Shoh Malang and Shoh Koshon, whose memory is still revered at shrines and other holy sites in the Pamirs (Middleton & Thomas 2012, 634-640); the Ismaili poet and philosopher, Nasr Khusraw, is credited with the conversion of the Pamiri people to the Ismaili faith in the eleventh century.



*Statue of Nasr Khusraw in Porshinev village (Shughnan)*

Of these, only Nasr had a lasting influence on literacy, and only indirectly and much later.

A remarkable recent doctoral thesis submitted at the University of Indiana notes an active production of Ismaili manuscripts from the 18th century onwards, suggesting a high degree of literacy, at least among the religious elite. Daniel Beben (2015) writes: "It was only in the eighteenth century that a written hagiographical tradition connected

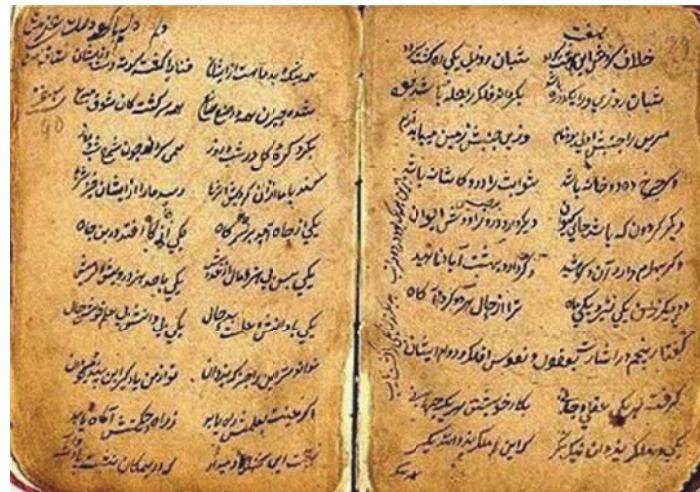
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<sup>1</sup> This article was published earlier on

<http://www.pamirs.org/Education%20and%20Mobility%20with%20pics.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> In his *Geographia* (circa 150 CE) Ptolemy described a trade route across Central Asia drawn from the writings of his contemporary Marinus of Tyre. Marinus' work has been lost, but was based on an account by the Macedonian Maës Titianus of his agents' travels to China. The 'Stone Tower' ('Tashkurgan' in Turkic languages) may well have been the city of this name in the Xinjiang province of China. (Middleton & Thomas 2012, 267-294)

with Nasir-i Khusraw took shape among Ismaili communities in Badakhshan. [...] [T]hat hagiographical production served as a medium through which these communities narrated themselves within both the framework of Islamic civilisation and of a transnational Ismaili identity, and advanced claims to political and social legitimacy within those frameworks." Literacy thus became an affirmation of Pamiri identity.



*Shish fasl (Six Discourses), by Nasir-i Khusraw. Persian manuscript, 13th/19th century*

The Ismaili faith, combining the notion of Islam as a revealed religion and the unique role of the Imam in interpreting the faith and guiding the faithful through farmans and talikas (oral and written pronouncements), has traditionally attached great importance to intellectual inquiry, learning and knowledge.

The pronouncements of the present Aga Khan and his grandfather Sultan Mohamed Shah in favour of education, particularly for girls, are well known. However, the commitment of the Pamiri Ismaili community to education for both boys and girls was strong prior to the teachings of Aga Khan III and had been recorded already in late nineteenth century reports by explorers. In 1879, Mukhtar Shah, an Indian native explorer ('pundit') sent to the Pamirs by the British administration in India to prepare maps of the region, observed girls' schools in Afghan Badakhshan (Tanner, Colonel H. C. B. 1883, 23); and, in the last years of the nineteenth century, a Danish explorer noted the existence of schools in the Pamirs for both boys and girls with professional teachers who could read and write: "If a man does not send his children to school or to the wandering Mullah, the elders of the town remonstrate with him in the matter [...]" (Olufsen 1904, 136-7)

It was the Russian presence, however, that led to the institutionalisation of education in the Pamirs.



*Dmitri Lvovich Ivanov  
(1846-1924)*

In August 1883, Dmitri Lvovich Ivanov, a Russian officer attached to an exploratory military expedition in the north-eastern Pamirs, left camp near Kara Kul and set off on his own down the Akbaital river to Murghab and Sarez in search of provisions for the detachment. At the village of Sarez (site of the earthquake of 1911 that flooded the valley and destroyed the village) he established the first contact by a Russian with the local inhabitants. This meeting was significant in several respects: on the one hand it awakened in Ivanov an interest in the language and ethnography of the Pamiri peoples that led, after Ivanov's return, to a blossoming of scientific research on the Pamirs in St. Petersburg; at the same time, more importantly for the subject of this presentation, Ivanov recounts that a delegation of local people handed him a letter sent up the valley from Shughnan, requesting that the Pamirs be placed under Russian protection. Presumably, the letter was in Persian script and is again an indication of a high degree of literacy. Subsequent Russian military expeditions were almost always accompanied by experts in various scientific disciplines, including linguistics.



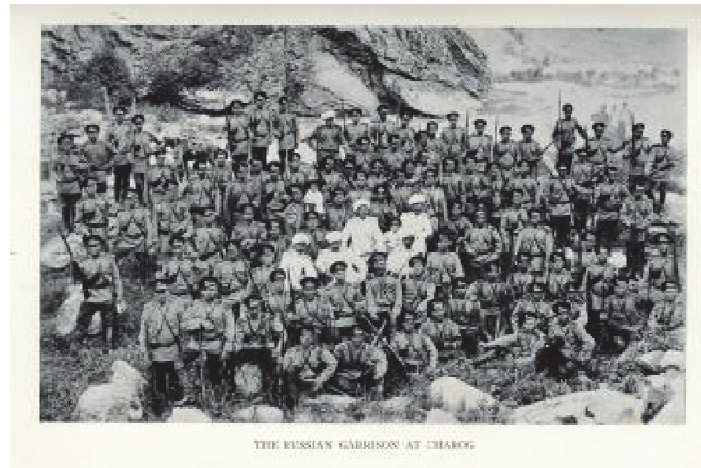
*Russian officers in Murghab  
(Filchner 1903)*



*Russian military base in Khorog  
(Arved Schultz, 1911)*

A few years later, the Russians established military bases in Murghab (1892) and Khorog (1895) and initiated more systematic social development for the local population. In

addition to protecting the local people from the depredations of the Afghans and Bukharans, the newly arrived Russians began road building, encouraged the use of horses and gradually spread a minimum of basic health care through the Russian *feldsher* system. A road between Osh in Kyrgyzstan and Murghab was opened in 1897 and the connection to Khorog was completed a few years later.



*Photo Ralph Cobbold, 1898*

The Russians introduced the first potatoes, cabbages, new seed varieties for cereals and some improvements in livestock. However, with poor soil, the high altitude, harsh winters, and the primitive tools available to the local inhabitants, no fundamental changes could be made to the essence of subsistence farming and nomadic herding. A Russian fact-finding mission in 1904-6 "was shocked by the extreme poverty of the local population [...]." (Bergne 2007, 34)



*Pamiri villager with goitre  
(Rickmers 1928)*

However, despite the poverty, the Russians opened a public school in Khorog in 1914. Following the October revolution, the Soviets chose the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO) as an example of socialist revolution in a Muslim country and invested



heavily in its modernisation "to show the neighbouring poor peoples to the south [...] the superiority of the Soviet system [...]." (Bliss 2006, 247) A hospital was built in Khorog in 1924; the airport in Khorog was completed in 1932 and the road between Osh and Khorog was fully asphalted and open to motor traffic by 1935. Following from these early Soviet initiatives, schools, hospitals, public meeting halls, power stations and electricity grids, phone lines, roads, and airports were subsequently built in all major areas of the province. School No. 12 in the village of Porshinev, for example, just outside Khorog, celebrated its seventieth anniversary in 1996 - the school bears the name of the first leader of the Tajik communist party, Shirinsho Shotemur, born in Shughnan.



*70th anniversary celebrations at school No. 12 in Porshinev (1996)*

State-sponsored education during this period began from the realisation that a large majority of party cadres in Tajikistan were illiterate. Schools for the eradication of illiteracy (Likbez) were organised from 1927 onwards (Bergne 2007, 63). Compulsory universal primary education was introduced in Tajikistan as early as February 1931 (Bergne 2007, 83).

The first nursery schools were set up at the end of the 1940s (Bliss 2006, 257); from the 1950s, education was being provided free from kindergarten to postgraduate studies and the literacy rate increased exponentially. In 1926 an official report by the Soviet Sredazburo (Central Asia Bureau) estimated village literacy in Tajikistan at 1.1% for males and 0.2% for females (Bergne 2007, 75); by 1984, the official estimate for the whole of GBAO was more than 99%. Where educational facilities were not available at village level, schooling was taken over by the state farms. GBAO held pride of place in the whole Soviet Union in numbers of higher education degrees and produced a disproportionate number of highly educated professionals who made valuable contributions to Tajik culture and society. Daulat Khudonazar, for example, the Pamiri presidential can-

didate in the first free elections in post-Soviet Tajikistan, was President of the Soviet All-Union Cinematographers Association.



*Young man reading, Gudara, Bartang valley (1996)*



*Schoolgirl addressing 70th anniversary celebration, Porshinev (1996)*

After the break-up of the Soviet Union, a 1993 programme feasibility study by the Aga Khan Foundation (AKF) noted that some three-quarters of the school-age population of GBAO had eleven years of schooling and almost all the remainder at least nine years. In addition, some 12% of school-leavers went on to university every year, 78% of teachers had taken five-year university diplomas and a significant proportion of the remainder had attended colleges of education (Middleton et al 1993, 51<sup>1</sup>; Bliss (2006), 257).

During the Soviet period, education in Tajikistan accounted for 40% of GDP and the Tajik education system was considered to be one of the best in the Soviet Union.



*Jonboz and musicians at Siponj village, Bartang valley (1993)*



*Performance of religious songs, Nisur village, Bartang valley (1996)*

As in the case of the relationship in the Pamirs between literacy and the writings of Nasr Khusraw, one reason for the high level of literacy in Tajikistan as a whole was certainly the existence of a body of literature in the Persian language, several of the authors of which were claimed as Tajik, even Ismaili. Another reason, of particular relevance in the Pamirs, is the lively tradition of music and dance, with religious (and secular) songs being handed down orally from generation to generation.

State expenditure started to decline in 1992, from 11.1% of the GDP in 1992 to 2.1% of the GDP in 1999. There was a dramatic increase in overall dropout rates (6% in 1989 to 20% in 1997) and in non-enrolment of children (an estimated 25% of girls and 20% of

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<sup>1</sup> The report notes that "there are said to be public libraries in all major centres." (Middleton et al 1993, 51).

boys aged 7-18 were not receiving formal education in 1996). In GBAO, however, drop-out rates were considerably lower than in many other regions (Middleton et al. 2003, 51-63).

School buildings were in desperate need of rehabilitation. Essential school supplies such as textbooks, notebooks, paper and chalk were lacking. Teachers' salaries declined sharply, and were often paid in arrears. Highly-qualified teachers were being forced to abandon teaching and turn to other income generating activities or emigrate, leaving behind uncertified teachers with limited teaching experience.

The Aga Khan Foundation's support to the education sector in GBAO started in 1996 and included the immediate supply of textbooks and essential supplies to schools for rent or sale by the schools to parents, thus creating a revolving fund and encouraging community involvement in schools. Using English as an entry point, AKF also worked with teachers to move away from traditional teacher-centred methods to a more student-centred interactive approach and focus on training at all levels of the education system, the revival or creation of local structures, the strengthening of the Institute of Professional Development (the key in-service training institution), and promoting community involvement in schools and local ownership of initiatives.

The challenges arising out of the extremely difficult context described above persist: a comprehensive, well-conceived educational reform plan remains elusive: central control over crucial educational areas such as curriculum and assessment is still almost total; and the concept of decentralised decision-making is only slowly being accepted.

In GBAO, the Aga Khan Lycee and the campus of the University of Central Asia in Khorog are intended to show what can be achieved through "centres of excellence" - they also illustrate, however, the limits of action by private philanthropic initiative, even with the resources available to the Aga Khan network.

More recent developments since the maturing of the AKF programmes are familiar to all those present at this seminar. I would only note two things:

1. The massive emigration of young people to Russia and elsewhere in search of financial support for their families, which has negative effects on local literacy and, above all, on local culture.
2. The strong motivation among young people to learn English. On the one hand it is seen as a passport to opportunities in the West - on the other, as was explained to me - "it is the language of the Imam".

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