Shighnan and Roshan in the Nineteenth Century

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Situated on both sides of the river Panja (the Upper Oxus) to the north-east of Badakhshan, the districts of Shighnan and Roshan constituted one principality. The river passing through it was narrow, constituting no barrier. The principality was inhabited by Ḥaḍramawtī Tajiks, who had lived there in compact villages from time immemorial. Agricultural produce in Shighnan and Roshan (wheat, barley, and varieties of beans), were, because of the shortage of arable land, insufficient. The bulk of the people lived on dried mulberry and a few boiled herbs (CHIAKARI) in late winter and early spring (the time of scarcity). The common people, as opposed to members of the ruling house, were very peaceful and fatalistic. All reports agree that robbery was not practised by them, and neither did they feud among themselves, nor with their neighbours in spite of the fact that the more zealous Sunni Uzbek marauders frequently raided their territory and sold their children and females into slavery. Rarely, if ever, did the Shighnani possess weapons. They were, thus, in sharp contrast to some other people in Afghanistan, who lived under similar subsistence economies, but who took to plundering and fighting. A characteristic of the Shighnani community was its sharp division into the ruling elite and commoners (KHAWASS and ʿAWAM). Despite its subsistence economy, the Shighnani community was socially very hierarchical. Here again it contrasted with many other communities in Afghanistan, which were egalitarian. Perhaps about 70% of the Shighnaniis smoked opium and drank opium—potion (GHAMZA) and lived in a state of perpetual inebriety and resignation. 1

The Shighnaniis focussed much on religion, despite their ignorance of it. They neither prayed nor observed fast. To them religious leaders rather
than religion as a set of principles, were the personification of faith. Hence their unbounded devotion to their religious leaders (PIRS) who were also their temporal rulers (MIRS) and like the MIRS of other Isma'ili communities they styled themselves “Shah” (king). In their theocratic communities these MIRS exercised absolute power over their subjects. Looking upon them as their personal property the MIRS disposed of their subjects as they pleased, sold their children or offered them as gifts to others. Through their representatives (KHALIFAS) they exacted ‘USHR as revenue 3, and enforced their authority by their retinue. But they had rivals among members of their own dynasty. Since succession in the political arena was not necessarily based on the principle of primogeniture but on the suitability of any member of the ruling class, its members fought for power whenever opportunity availed itself. Civil wars and murder were often the result.

As guardians of the trade routes leading to Kashghar, Yarkand, Bukhara, Chitral, and Peshawar the MIRS of Shighnan levied tolls on merchandise. Cotton, china, tea, shoes, etc. (for the ruling class) were brought there by merchants to exchange for slaves, woollen goods, and furs. When the Chinese occupied Kashghar in 1759, they paid the Shighnani MIRS “a kind of subsidy” to keep the trade route safe and open.4 The MIRS of Shighnan paid a portion of their incomes to the Agha Khan of Bombay as the supreme PIR of all the Isma'illis, and gave occasional presents (NAZRANA) of horses and iron to the Mir of Badakhshan. Although Shighnan was at all times a dependency of Badakhshan in the 1870’s, the relationship of their MIRS was not one of inferiority but rather of equal partners in a loose confederation. Clearly, Badakhshan served as a central state, but its MIR neither interfered with the affairs of other MIRS, including those of Shighnan, nor received any substantial tribute from them, except some military aid in times of emergency. 5

Although Badakhshan was first conquered in the reign of Ahmad Shah, its ties with Shighnan only loosened significantly in the second reign of Amir Sher ‘Ali when the autonomy of Badakhshan was curtailed and that of Shighnon due to its inaccessibility remained intact. In the reign of Amir ‘Abd al—Rahman, Badakhshan was the first to lose autonomy, and Sardar ‘Abd Allah Tokhay, backed by a strong contingent of troops from 1880, ruled over it as governor.

The rulers of Shighnan also improved their position by establishing matrimonial relationships with the surrounding rulers, or with other members of their dynasties. In the 1870’s, for instance, they had matrimonial relationships with Ya’qub Beg of Kashghar, Khudayar Khan of Yarkand, Prince Afzal al—Mulk of Chitral, the Uzbek Mir of Kunduz, and some Afghan princes and officials. It should, however, be noted that since Shighnani females were
known for their beauty, such marriages were one-sided, and politically perhaps not very significant.

Shighnan and Roshan were ruled from the seventh century, by the descendants, of a certain Sayyed, Shah—i Khamosh, who came from Persia and converted the bulk of the inhabitants from Zoroastrianism to the Shi‘ite faith of Islam. He wrested Shighnan from Kahakah, the then governor of the Zoroasters, whose capital scat was in Balkh. To this day the tomb of Shah-i Khamosh at Bar Panja 6 is visited by the faithful. Subsequently the descendants of Shah—i Khamosh expanded their rule which at one time reached the frontiers of Badakhshan and of Chitral 7 and at another time "Wakhan and Darwaz and all the surrounding States were under the rule of the King of Shighnan."8 But in 1629 Mir Murad Beg" the most powerful Uzbek prince south of the Amu up to Bamian" 9 overran Badakhshan and "made himself master of the whole country from Wakhan to Balkh inclusive, and from Hindu Kush to the borders of Karatgin". 10 He sold a large number of the inhabitants of Badakhshan into slavery or let them perish of fever in the swampy plains of Kunduz. The Mir of Shighnan paid the Mir of of Kunduz yearly tribute of fifteen slave—girls.11 This state of affairs came to an end during the reign of Amir Sher ‘Ali whose strong governor Na‘ib Muhammad ‘Alam pacified the whole of Turkestan, and in 1874 made the Mir of Shighnan, Shah Yusuf ‘Ali Shah accept the suzerainty of Kabul. 12 Although a vassal, the Mir still had a free hand in the internal administration of his domain. During the first three years of the reign of Amir ‘Abd al—Rahman, the Mir ruled over his subjects as before, sending slave—boys, girls, and other things as tribute. 13 In 1883, his relations with Kabul deteriorated. Shighnan had at that time become internationally significant, and Yusuf ‘Ali Shah showed inclination toward Russian—controlled Bukhara.

Shah Yusuf ‘Ali Shah had, actually, been perturbed over the fate of his domain since 1874 when he heard of the agreement reached between Russia and Britain that the Oxus should become the boundary between Bukhara and Afghanistan. This was to split up his domain, with the larger and more populous part of it (i.e. the area lying between the Panja and Aksu—Murghab which included the three long valleys of Shakh, Ghund and Bartang) becoming a part of Bukhara. Yusuf ‘Ali then decided that his best policy would be to keep good relations with both countries in order to secure the whole of his kingdom. As a precaution he handed over Roshan to his minor son. But Roshan had also become significant because it possessed abundant supplies of iron, which was included as part of the Mir’s tribute to Kabul. 14 In 1882, the Mir hospitality received a Russian explorer in Shighnan. 15 In the following July, a Russian mission visited the Mir and reportedly, arranged with him that “he need not fear the Ruler of Badakhshan” as “The Russians
are looking upon Shighnan on the right bank of the Oxus as within the sphere of their influence”. 16

Meanwhile, the Mir removed his family to Sarojan, adjoining Darwaz (a dependency of Bukhara) at the time that he refused a summons from the Governor of Badakhshan. The Mir feared that he would be deposed. The year before the Governor had replaced the Murs of the different districts of Badakhshan (and other influential elements of the ruling dynasty) by officials of his own, and deported them to other areas. 17 This in spite of the pledge given to them in 1880 personally by the Amir to the effect that “so long as he held power, the Murs of Badakhshan would be exempt from paying revenue; (and) all that would be required of them was to acknowledge his supremacy”. 18 In addition, the Mir of Shighnan had had correspondence with the officials of Russia, Bukhara and China from Yarkand. Although he had personally assured the Governor that he had replied to the effect that since he (the Mir) was the subject of Afghanistan, 19 he was not willing to receive their emissaries, the Governor suspected him of mischief. At the same time, in Shighnan itself, a rival faction, led by Darab Shah, had emerged which had weakened the position of the Mir considerably. 20 At any rate the Amir suspected the Mir of intrigueing with Russia “for allowing Russians to visit Shighnan”, 21 and ordered his removal. 22 Mainly because of strong frontiers of Shighnan this was accomplished with some difficulty, and in September 1863 the Mir, accompanied by 130 of his followers, was brought to Kabul. 23 The whole of Shighnan and Roshan were then, for the first time, brought under the DIRECT rule of Kabul. Troops were stationed there and a sub-governor appointed. The rumour that a new order had been established spread far and wide. Those Shighnans who had lived in bondage for years escaped from their masters and returned to their homes to live as free men. 24 Although now freed from the clutches of their autocratic Murs the Shighnans found themselves subject to the excesses of government officials, Barely a year had passed when from Badakhshan...nearly half the population...deserted for Illissar, Kulab, and Karategin.” 25 At any rate, the new sub-governor, shortly after he took over, stopped the expedition of the famous scholar M. Ivanoff, which endeavoured to enter Shighnan. 26 All these developments brought the hitherto autonomous frontier kingdom of Shighnan into the limelight of international diplomacy. This aspect will be briefly outlined here as it throws light on the future of Shighnan.

Russia protested to Britain over the Amir’s proceedings in Shighnan, while maintaining that Shighnan was always independent, Russia claimed that the principality was not “among the number of those provinces which were recognized by the agreement arrived at in 1873 between Russia and England, as forming part of the possessions of the Ameer of Afghanistan”. Therefore,
considering the Amir's proceedings in Shighnan" in flagrant violation of the terms of the agreement in question", Russia asked Britain to induce him "to renounce forever all interterence in its affairs." 27 The Amir, on the other hand, claimed that the principality was a part of Afghanistan for the simple reason that at all time it had been a dependency of Badakhshan, "a province which had been formally decided to belong to Afghanistan." 28 In support of this claim, it was argued that the Aksu—Murghab, and not the Panja river flowing from Sarikol, was the river which had been agreed upon as the international boundary. 29 Several despatches between the British and Russian Governments were exchanged, but the Amir showed no inclination to give in, and for eleven years, Shighnan remained under his rule. In the early 1890's, Russia increased military as well as diplomatic pressure. In 1892, a Russian contingent under Col. Yanoff massacred Afghan frontier guards at Samatosh in Shighnan on the eastern extremity of Yahsilkol near the Panj. 30 Next year, another Russian contingent of 200 troops led by Col. Yannovskly entered Roshan, but the Afghans successfully drove them back, as they had similarly driven back a Chinese contingent in Samatosh before its fall to the Russians. Meanwhile, the Russian Government, in her negotiations with Britain, commented strongly on the evacuation by the Afghans of parts of Shighnan and Roshan. Finally, the British Government, in the same fasion that in 1885 it had acquiesced to Russia's demand on the Panjden complied with Russia's demand, and urged the Amir to do the same. In return, the Amir was to occupy Wakhah and a small part of Darwaz to the south of the Panja which Bukhara was to surrender. The British Government, on its part, was willing to accept the Amir's demands to certain controversial posts along the eastern borders of Afghanistan. The Amir consented, and in Kabul, in accord with an agreement reached with a British mission led by Mortimer Durand, evacuated the territories of Shighnan and Roshan beyond the Panja and the stream remained the boundary between Bukhara and Afghanistan. 31 Thus, the Tajik communities of Shighnan and Roshan as well as that of Darwaz, like the several Pashtoon and Baluch communities along the eastern and southern frontiers of Afghanistan, were bifurcated.

FOOT NOTE - Kakar

2. Kushkaki, 338.
4. BIOGRAPHICAL ACCOUNTS OF CHIEFS, SARDARS AND OTHERS OF
Afghanistan, Official Publication of the British Government of India, Calcutta, 1888, p. 233. The actual annual amount was ten yambus or about 1,730 Indian rupees.


7. Kushkaki, 336

8. BACA, 233.


14. BACA, 234.


21. BACA, 234.


23. Col. Afzal (Mama Khel), II Sept. 83, PSLI, 37, 1427.

24. Wheeler, 107

25 Peshawer Agency Diay 5 Sept. 1884, PSLI, 41, 1586

26 Wheeler, 104

27 Wheeler, 105

28 Wheeler, 106

29 Wheeler, 182

30 Wheeler, 185

31 For details see Singh, D, INDIA AND AFGHANISTAN, 1876—1907, A STUDY IN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS, Queensland University Press, 1963, PP. 144—147