

Anvar Jamolzoda

JOURNEY TO SOGDIANA'S HEIRS



"Business and politics"
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Field observations and historical notes about the past and today of the Yagnob Valley

Over the last 15 years, a number of international as well as national field studies and publications were devoted to the Yagnob river valley, some of them of sensational nature. However, the so-called “Yagnobi mystery” gained currency throughout the world after an article entitled “The Yagnob valley and its population” published by the German scientist, G. Kapus, in a European geographic magazine in 1883. Back then, the author noted unique character of the valleys’ nature and singularity of the Yagnobi language. He also indicated the need for further detailed studies of the region.

The years of civil war put a lid on active field investigations and deterred many foreign researchers, although Russian scientists, despite all the odds, continued their studies of the region even in those years.

For instance, this theme has been consistently studied by the reputed scholar, Dr. Alexey Gunya (doctor of geographic sciences). His first book in English about Yagnob: “Yagnob Valley – nature, history, and chances of a mountain community development in Tajikistan” was published in 2002. This is the first publication about Yagnob giving a detailed analysis of the past and present day situation of the Yagnobi people with an attempt to provide projections for their future based on review of their settlement patterns and land use practices.

Alexey is currently living and working in Berlin. Upon hearing about my plans to look into the current situation in Yagnob with a view to reviving the idea of establishment of the Fan-Yagnob natural and ethnographic park, he suggested that I take as an assistant his research associate, Valeriy Klassen.

Although Valeriy’s research interests mostly focus on problems and consequences of inundation as a result of the proposed construction of Rogun HPP, he was also planning to update his data on Yagnob region that he had collected ten years ago during the field investigation organized by Alexey Gunya in 1994.

A little more than 20 years ago, during my geological practical training, I also managed to spend several weeks in the uppermost reaches of the Yagnob river valley, where I did not see any local residents aside from shepherds from Matcha district.

Apart from reviewing the possibility of establishment of a protected natural territory, we were planning to focus our work on interviewing local resettled population to study their mode of life, their understanding of and attitude towards the possible establishment of the national park and prospects of Yagnob’s future development.

Before proceeding to describe our impressions of the field investigation we would like to provide the reader with some background information on Yagnob.



Historical and geographic summary

(with reference to A.Gunya's materials).

The Yagnob river is a part of the Zeravshan river basin. It is 130 km long and is referred administratively to Aini district of Sughd region. The river originates in a high-mountain valley of the same name situated between the Southern slope of the Zeravshan range and Northern slope of the Hissar range. In the upper reaches of the Yagnob river maximum elevation of the surrounding mountains can be over 5,000 meters above the sea level whereas elevation of the water line ranges from 2200 to 2800 meters, i.e. elevation difference between the watersheds and the bottom of this rather narrow valley varies within 1500-2500 meters. The longstanding interest of researchers in the Yagnob valley (which increased significantly over the last 15 years) is primarily related to its cultural and historical specifics mainly rooted in its geographic isolation. Until early 2000, the nearest populated area with electricity supply and an unmetalled access road suitable for cars was the village of Margib. Further upstream from the village there lies a constricted canyon type gorge nominally separating Yagnob from the rest of the outside world. It is here that the Yagnob wall favored by many mountaineers is located. For many centuries before construction of the road the Yagnobi people would live in isolation for 8 months in a year, snow and avalanche hazards preventing any contacts with the outside world. In cases of emergency in wintertime, Yagnobis would make use of the frozen river bed, which was fraught with significant risks. Yagnobis themselves as well as a few historians (for example, Bartold) identify the valley residents with Sogdiana, an interesting civilization quite well-developed for its time. This presumption is primarily based on affinity of the ancient Sogdian and Yagnobi languages. The earliest references to Sogdiana date back to late VI - early V century BC. Alongside with Bactria and Khorosm, Sogdiana was the most ancient state formation on the territory of Central Asia. Slave-owning society represented by the castes of priests, warriors, farmers and slaves started to take shape here quite early. At the same time, androcentric clannish relations preserved until now in the form of one of the main social institutions - avlod, played a central role (according to Bushkov, 1991). From time immemorial, the role of a rural community that survived until now in the form of Yagnobi "sada" was also quite significant. Zoroastrianism together with primitive cults was widely prevalent.

Presumably from IV century BC, the valley becomes a perfect sanctuary for population from oases situated downstream along the Zeravshan river.

It was this valley that provided refuge for population escaping from nomadic tribes, invasions of Alexander the Great, Arab, Mongolian, Turkic and other conquerors of other people's land who caused destruction of the highly developed culture and architecture and imposed their religions and other traditions on local sedentary farmers.

As a result of Arab incursions in VII - VIII centuries all the previously constructed architectural and religious facilities were destroyed. Virtually all settlements were wiped off the face of the earth, whereas new ones were established within the territory of Arab garrisons using taxation inducement and other types of coercion. But ethnic composition of the population still remained homogeneous at that time and the Sogdian language with its dialects was predominant.

In early 13th century, Genghis Khan conquered Ferghana and areas along the Syr-Darya and Zeravshan. His vanguard advanced as far as Penjikent. As a result, mountainous areas of the Zeravshan basin became a reliable sanctuary for population of state formations that existed at that time to the South and North of that territory.

Arab, Mongol and Turkic invasions, settlement of conquerors and absorption of indigenous people in oases resulted in catastrophic consequences, and more accurately, in discontinuation of socio-economic and cultural development of Central Asia. It was then that the process of forcing out farmers and ancestors of Tajiks into the mountains started and their national identity began to be leveled out, which alongside with the loss of Bukhara and Samarkand territories brought about the pointless civil war in late XX century and the current problems associated with regionalism and strife between different clans.

Arab invaders who vehemently destroyed all documentary records and cultural sites of Sogdian Zoroastrians "distinguished" themselves particularly in this respect as was noted already by academician Gafurov. Population of the upper Zeravshan almost until the beginning of the XIX century had continued to use Eastern Iranian Sogd dialects, however, later all of them with the exception of the Yagnobi people assimilated with the Tajiks and adopted their language.

The invasions destroyed an advanced (for its time) system of state centralization and a well-developed culture of irrigated farming.

Instead, the valley residents had to live for many years (except for the period of Russian-Soviet enlightenment and liberation from ignorance imposed by mullahs and khans when Tajiks managed to acquire partial independence and make a vigorous leap in their cultural and industrial development) within the state oriented on nomadic way of living and development of stock-breeding, which doomed them to stagnation and backwardness.

In XVI- early XIX centuries there occurred migrations of Iranian speaking farming groups from the area who were replaced by flows of Turkic speaking stock-breeding groups who settled in the middle and upper reaches of the Zeravshan occupying all locations more or less suitable for living.

But the Yagnobi people, due to inaccessibility of their valley, did not assimilate as much as the rest of the population and managed to preserve up until 1970 the last habitat of Sogdiana heirs, their language and partly their folkways.

Russian scientists and military explorers participating in various expeditions carried out in the pre-revolutionary period from 1820 up to 1906 particularly noted that the Yagnobis had European appearance and that local women walked around with their faces uncovered.

Upon annexation of Yagnob (among other territories) to Russia in 1870, Yagnobis could breathe more freely since although the land was declared to be the Russian tsar's property it remained in their use. In addition, they were given portions of land formerly owned by the clergy and communities, which helped increase agricultural production.

However, starting from 1887 tsarist regime imposed household and land tax in addition to the existing haraj (tax on irrigated land), tanab tax (on rain-fed land) and zaqot (tax on livestock). This innovation started to undermine paying capacity of the poor and middle peasants causing a new wave of migration among the population. In 1895, the land tax was abolished which brought about a rapid population growth, its rate constituting in certain years as much as 7-10%. This resulted in new migration flows - this time towards the mountainous areas, and subsequent increase in area of cultivated lands. During the following period from 1909 to 1920 (civil war and starvation) up to 10% of the total Yagnob population (estimated at 5000-7000 people at that time) left the area.

In XX century, like for many centuries before that, Yagnob remained at a low level of development and its population was rather poor and half-starved. Overpopulation, limited availability of fertile land and natural isolation resulted in almost complete lack of new technologies used in agricultural pro-

duction with exception of a few small scale primitive flour-mills. The revolution and the ensuing grim struggle with the basmachi undermined poor as they were households of Yagnobis. For example, according to M.Andreyev who visited Yagnob in those years (his diaries were published only in 1970's) there remained only 4 horses owned by Yagnobi population as compared to the previously recorded number of 300! Local soviet authorities, acting according to the uniform pattern and at the direction of the higher-ups, imposed establishment of 2 kolkhozes which could not achieve self-sufficiency level on account of the highlanders' attitude towards them (land became common property...), to say nothing of the lack of roads and machinery. As a result those two kolkhozes had to eke out an unmirthful existence heavily subsidized by the state.

Besides, short-sighted policy aimed at establishment of major stock-breeding farms in valleys brought about degradation of Yagnob pastureland where huge flocks were brought for grazing from the Southern and Northern districts of Tajikistan.

Despite repeated appeals of the local population, official authorities were in no hurry to construct an access road. On the contrary, based on the decision of Aini district executive committee of February 27, 1970, 500 families were evicted to the Foodless Steppe (now Zafarabad district) and about 200 families were resettled in areas in the immediate vicinity of Dushanbe.

Local officials had ample experience in this respect. In the post-war period they had been zealously evicting highlanders from Karategin and Darvaz to flatland, predominantly to cotton growing areas of the country. Naturally, the authorities justified the relocations by the need to save the highlanders from natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, landslides and avalanches) whereas in reality they were reluctant to finance additional protective infrastructure and needed additional manpower that could be put to slave labor on cotton plantations.

The Yagnobi people, having expanded their territorial presence in the valleys, lost their immediate homeland for some time. Thereby, like any other highlanders accustomed to a different mode of life and climatic conditions they were doomed to gradual extinction under a scorching sun and defoliant rains. Just a few families managed to remain in the Yagnob valley taking care of graveyards and mazars, receiving guests, pilgrims and regular tourists.

But due to transformation in society that started in mid-80's with Gorbachev's coming to power the Yagnobi people started returning to their hearths and homes at their own risk and peril. On account of an increased attention paid by the press and scientists to the Yagnob phenomenon and having become somewhat conscious of the unfair treatment the speakers of Sogdiana language had received in the past, the Executive committee of Leninabad region adopted its resolution of January 30, 1990.

A significant amount of work was accomplished at that time including provision of machinery and materials for construction of the road, establishment of 5 schools, organized regular supplies of manufactured commodities and food. There were also plans to restore a collective farm.

Unfortunately, government assistance ceased with the collapse of the USSR. At present the process of organized returning of population to the Yagnob valley has stopped. But this is happening not only due to lack of funds. People who still remember their life in Yagnob have already become elderly and it is hard for them to agree to move back, to say nothing of younger people who are used to living in lowlands.

At present there are slightly more than 300 people living in the valley on a permanent basis. About 200-500 more come regularly to the valley in summertime to visit their relatives or bringing flocks of sheep owned by hundreds of Yagnobis from Zafarabad district.





After meeting my above mentioned assistant from Moscow, Valeriy, we spent several days in Khujand. Apart from working meetings and procurement of various materials for our expedition and a ritual trip to Kairakkum water reservoir we also spared some time to go to Zafarabad. We certainly wanted first of all to see present day living conditions of valley Yagnobis and learn in greater detail how they feel at their new place of residence.

Early in the morning, an old but tidy on the inside bus with a bit of squeaking drove us to Zafarabad issuing a smokescreen now and then. Quite remarkably, buses to and from Khujand central bus terminal still come and go on schedule like in the time of the Soviet Union. Moreover, I found out that the fare is clearly insufficient to ensure proper maintenance and adequate wages for bus drivers.

The road to Zafarabad runs over the territory of a neighboring country and Valera, having stuck his head out of the bus window in amazement, was taking panoramic photographs of the road squeezed on both sides with barbed wire fence and carefully watched from lookout towers by border guards. This surreal picture reminded me, for one, of my life in a boarding house in Chukotka that in Stalin's time had been used as a part of a transit prison complex. My window had overlooked lopsided lookout towers and other security facilities which made you feel queasy sometimes of a morning...

And here we are, in the beginning of the XXI century having to travel in the unsightly view of border facilities while thinking how pseudopoliticians and simply senseless and unscrupulous people could destroy so quickly something that had been carefully molded for centuries in Central Asia.

Having fallen into talk with our fellow passengers we found out that the situation was even worse before. Border guards from the neighboring country which sprung into being as a result of demarcation done in Stalin's time would sometimes off-handedly stop buses and upon pain of body search or debarkation would extort Tajik somonis from passengers, somonis being more valuable than the currency used in the border guards' country.

One young Yagnobi traveling from Dushanbe to visit his relatives told me indignantly that during his previous visit a border guard, having learnt that he lived in Dushanbe, was trying to find fault with him interrogating the young Yagnobi about the purpose of his trip. "To my question as to what the problem was the border guard replied with a smirk: "Who knows, you might be a bandit or a terrorist". But as soon as I offered him 5 somonis he left me alone without even inquiring what I was carrying in my luggage. This shows that conscience can be bought for 5 somonis!"

It is true, unfortunately, that such public officers, who only yesterday were regular soviet preschoolers, schoolchildren, pioneers and Komsomol members whom we used to watch with affection in school dramatics and performances, have turned now into insatiable predators ever watchful and ready to spring at their prey in the form of resigned CIS citizens at various borders, check-points and posts.

By the nature of my work I have to travel quite frequently passing through our airports and crossing borders. Above all things, I can note perceptible improvement of service quality and a decrease of blatant extortion. Valeriy who had recently returned from one of his field investigations in Caucasus through the Ukraine confirmed this observation of mine. In reply to my question about his impressions of the airport in Khujand he said:

" Your Tajik border guards and customs officers are mere angels indeed compared to their colleagues in the independent Ukraine!"

A lot of law enforcement officers carry out their duties in a commendable and manful manner but they have to pay with their lives and health for the consequences of corruption, people's indifference and tolerance with regard to changes brought about in our society under the slogans of

“democratization, liberalization and free choice” in accordance with the rules established by predators in power...

In two hours and a half we reached the district center where we promptly found the district administrative building. We were rather surprised to see that the streets were comparatively tidy and orderly. There were a lot of small cafe and small restaurants and we had an inexpensive and tasty lunch in one of them. Prices of some products, not to mention melons and water-melons, in the central district market were somewhat cheaper than in Khujand.

A militia guard at the entrance told us that almost all members of the administration had gone “on a site visit” accompanying some important official from Dushanbe. Of course, polite people as we are, we had advised the deputy chairman of the Khukumat, Begmahmad Safarov, of our visit beforehand. However, as the saying goes: man proposes but God disposes. The resourceful militia guard promptly helped us to find the deputy chairman of the district agricultural committee, also a Yagnobi, who readily answered all Valeriy’s questions. Our next visit was to the district education department also headed by a Yagnobi. But we missed him by a few minutes. He had left for the closing ceremony in a summer camp in Shahrستان mountains.

Having talked to the department staff who would not let us go until we tried a delicious watermelon with them we proceeded further. In all the countries that I visited so far, which is more than 40 now, I could not help noticing the difference between the degree of hospitality and kindness of heart that distinguishes metropolitan and large city residents from people living in provinces. Thus, throughout our journey every person we came across was sincerely willing to help us and extend his hospitality although their material well-being appeared to be poorer than that of large city residents. But their spirit turned out to be stronger, meaning that they did not change much under the influence of the recent socio-economic transformations.

Another situation can be witnessed for the last 15 years in Dushanbe where adaptation of newcomers (who settled in the city as a result of the civil war or came over after their relatives who had received lucrative positions after the carve-up of power) is proceeding painfully slowly for the remaining indigenous residents of Dushanbe.

Starting from 1970, the Yagnobi people had to establish their lives from scratch in Zafarobod district. On account of different climate and labor in cotton fields the highlanders’ life expectancy dropped down dramatically, not to mention the detriment to their health. Despite the fact that Yagnobis generally have large families their numbers increased but slightly over the past years.

The main Yagnobi settlement in Zafarobod district is the village of Mehnatobod, but there are a few more small populated areas where Yagnobis tried to settle together. The Yagnobi language is not used as a working language in any organization as opposed, of course, to the Tajik and Uzbek languages. Although Yagnobi is a rather unusual language to study, some Uzbeks and Tajiks living next door to Yagnobis have also learnt to speak the language of ancient Sogdiana. There are no specialized schools providing education in Yagnobi so far. However, schoolchildren learn their mother tongue for two hours a week as an optional course that was introduced in 1998. Financial constrictions prevent advanced study of the language and establishment of Yagnobi schools in the area.

There is not a single organization in Zafarobod district that could be lobbying the issues of preservation of the language and culture, and promote Yagnobi traditions and history. In our opinion, support of local authorities will be required at the initial stage in order to establish a branch of the national non-governmental organization “Yahyoi Yagnob” in the district.

Some Yagnobis complained during interviews that there was not a single Yagnobi in public offices at the regional level and that just two Yagnobis were working within the district authority of Zafarobod. In their opinion, this situation has a direct impact on reduction of the number of people who can speak

Yagnobi. Although there are no exact statistics to this effect but this number is clearly no more than 5000. Having no specific information about Sughd region, it is fair to say however that I personally know several Yagnobis holding quite high positions of responsibility.

But all Yagnobis unanimously agree that there are very few people who feel at home with the Yagnobi language and who know history of their own people. Among those they single out S.Mirzoev and B.Aliev who hosts a special program on the national radio with support from UNESCO.

Over the last few years it became fashionable to use the words Sogd and Sogdian instead of Yagnobi. Some people feel bound to extend their lineage all the way back to ancient Sogdians. A certain role in this respect was also played by the political situation that came about in early 90's which was characterized by rivalry between regions with a gradual loss of high positions by urban residents of one region in favor of natives of another region.

The so called "Leninabad elite" that used to be in power at the height of the conflict (it came to power during the Soviet period after the loss of Samarkand and Bukhara) started to lose ground as a result of lack of decisive action on the part of the then president and without support from Moscow. Due to the above reasons from the very beginning of the conflict that elite had to involve in public administration new leaders from the poorest clans that had been denied power for centuries in the country's past.

Quite naturally, having changed from their traditional gowns or military uniforms into suits, some representatives of the new elites who had never before made any conspicuous efforts to study or to work hard to become good professionals were only too glad to put on European clothes and affect importance at international meetings.

No country can make significant progress in its development in an environment of corruption and cronyism. Tajikistan will probably learn how to address this problem in due time. The solution might lie in establishment of a confederation like in Switzerland or in strengthening the role of the legitimately elected parliament and local self-governance bodies.

As I have already mentioned, Valeriy and I were interested both in social and cultural values of Yagnob. Valeriy became particularly interested in mixed marriages and the language used in such families. Of course, there are quite a lot of such families and sometimes they use just one language as the main means of communication. And more often than not the choice is not in favor of Yagnobi.

On our way back from Zafarabad to Khujand we happened to be traveling together with an interesting person whose name was Subhon. He told us that his deceased father, a Tajik from Aini district, had abducted his mother from Yagnob (who is still in good health now despite her 90 years of age). We fell into conversation with him and found out that he is the head of the district branch of veterans' society and a manager of a leased farm.

Looking at stooped children and women working cotton fields in a 40-degree heat, we argued with Valeriy about the need for diversification, i.e. staged reduction of land area used for cotton production and expansion of land under different crops alongside with establishment of small agro processing enterprises.

The single-crop farming system of cotton production coupled with lack of freedom, both spiritual and commercial, destroys not only natural environment (salination and massive loss of water) but also the very mind of the man, developing a servile mentality, not to mention remuneration for the slave labor amounting to a mere pittance.

For example, if aluminum and cotton production were to be reduced even by 25%, it would provide the much valued land for more efficient types of horticultural produce which could significantly improve the quality of life. And precious water would not be evaporating without a trail by millions of cubic meters; salination and degradation of land would stop. The need to attract investment from

outside will then cease and there will be no more serfdom involving intermediaries, cotton exchange, futures contracts, etc.

Our opponent replied to this that if he ever hires additional labor force from outside it happens quite infrequently. For the most part they manage by themselves. The key to success is availability of machinery and current assets. He does have difficulties sometimes with regard to marketing of his produce, but he cannot complain that he is fleeced by intermediaries. He also uses the opportunity of direct export but more often he prefers to pass these concerns on to the national cotton exchange and its representatives.

Meanwhile, indigenous Zafarobod residents when talking about the Yagnobi people always emphasize that their relative prosperity is mostly due to fact that they have been allowed to lease some parts of the former sovkhoz lands.

The next day before our departure for Yagnob we decided to have a swim in the Kairakkum water reservoir. Having had a good day's rest we made our acquaintance with Director of the recreation center. In his office, we met Oleg Panfilov who had also studied issues of Yagnob in his time. At the end of our conversation, Oleg recommended that we pay attention to the fact that some elements of Zoroastrianism (as he construes them) are still preserved in Yagnob. Indeed, the people of Yagnob have preserved up to now the ancient, pre-Muslim beliefs in sacred rocks.

Like in many other mountainous areas there are a number of superstitions still prevalent here. For example, Yagnobis believe that you should never blow out fire, never shake water off your hands after washing them, etc.

The rest of our trip to Yagnob took us a couple of days until we reached the first Yagnobi village of Bedef. First we were detained visiting an old acquaintance of mine, Ahliddin Kamilov, the head of a coal mining area in Sarvad settlement. And secondly, instead of renting a car we decided to hitch-hike and walk all the way, although, frankly speaking, it was a tall order with rucksacks weighing 25 kg each. As a matter of fact, apart from personal things we were bringing along exercise books, pens and other small presents for Yagnobi children. However, this mode of travel gave us an opportunity to enjoy splendid views of the valley at leisure.

Historically, Yagnobi villages in the lower and upper portions of the valley are sort of braced against more numerous villages where only Tajik population lives. Our goal was to go up along the right bank of the river, reach the "Yagnobi nucleus" and spend the rest of our time in the valley studying and interviewing residents of 14 Yagnobi villages still remaining in the valley of the former 30. Before the eviction, there were 15 households on the average in each village. At present, the maximum of 11 households are living in the village of Pskan whereas in the rest of the villages the number of inhabited houses ranges from 2 to 4.

En route, we frequently met Yagnobis from Dushanbe and Zafarobod who come over every year to visit their old houses and to let their personal livestock graze at the pastures. Construction of the road to the village of Margib situated a few kilometers from the national highway Dushanbe-Khujand was started after adoption by Leninabad Regional executive committee of its resolution of January 30, 1990.

People here still remember with gratitude Kahor Mahkamov the then First Secretary of the CPT Central Committee who came to Yagnob to review the situation in person and to give instructions to facilitate returning of people. The same year, machinery and materials for road construction were provided, five schools were constructed and regular supplies of manufactured commodities and food were organized. There were plans to establish a collective farm (kolkhoz) here.

Unfortunately, government assistance ceased with the collapse of the USSR when construction of the road was just begun. But in the early 2000 a small section of the road and the first bridge was

constructed with assistance of now deceased Kenjaev whose ancestors also came from these parts.

It would seem that given a large number of well-to-do Yagnobis living in Zafarabad construction of the road could be accelerated. But according to local residents there are few people willing to invest in this project.

They also asked us to mention specifically employees of Dushanbe Central Department Store Ashur Rahmonov and Kurbon Sharipov. One of them spent his personal money that he had been saving for hadj (pilgrimage) for many years to construct a bridge across the Yagnob. He decided that this application of his money would be more useful and urgent, which earned him well-deserved respect among his people.

On the other hand, one cannot help being surprised by the fact that construction of the road stopped not just because of lack of funds and explosives, but also because residents of the upstream villages could not agree along which bank of the river the road should run. At present, instead of trying to save scanty available funds the people are constructing two roads at a time with obvious disregard of geoenvironmental specifics. This becomes apparent from the recent displacements of soil and landslides.

Having spent the night in Bedef, we moved on to the upper villages. Muzaffar, a 22 year old humorist volunteered to accompany us there. Muzaffar himself had left Yagnob for Dushanbe a couple of years ago because in his opinion there is no future for his children in the valley. Almost in every village there is at least one family packed and ready to go. Among their main reasons for leaving people mention lack of a year-round road, medical services and need for antibiotics that many people simply cannot afford here. For example, in winter of 1998, 14 people died here within one week of catarrhal and inflammatory diseases.

In the past, it was possible to summon an air ambulance via a radio station in the village of Tagichinor. Regrettably now, there no funds not only for the ambulance aircraft but even to maintain the communication channel. When asked about the situation with education, residents of all villages complained foremost about lack of any opportunity to provide education for their children. Most children cannot properly read or count and the problem is more prevalent among girls whereas at the beginning of the 20th century, according to M.S.Andreyev (1970), women were more literate than men because they earned their living by copying religious books.

In answer to Valeriy's question about who is the president of Tajikistan, some children named a local resident who is responsible for distribution of humanitarian flour...

There is a disastrous shortage of textbooks and desks. When we entered the only operational school in the upper village of Kiriont, which is somewhat of center of the valley, it reminded us of a rather primitive hut. I did not see anything like it even in the poorest countries of Africa. Strange though it may seem, but just 30 kilometers from this area there is an asphalted highway with hundreds of jeeps busily scurrying along on a daily basis with curious faces of foreigners or local staff often eyeing their surroundings indifferently or arrogantly, all of them being employees of omnifarious international organizations.

It has been many years since the war ended and they have adopted development projects as the primary meaning of their lives. One cannot help wondering at the diligence they employ inventing new loans and grants, scraps of which, being left over after various "kickbacks and bribes", payments to staff and insatiable intermediaries - local NGOs and pseudoscientists for production of solid looking paper reports, may reach the target population.

The few professionals and scientists with decent education who are used to doing their favorite job for nothing but salary are trying to make both ends meet. They have to write various reports and books in lieu of ignorant and poorly educated managers of various "offices" and projects who are

distinguished not by their intelligence but rather by their grasping reflexes.

It is ridiculous how they love publishing allegedly their own books lavishly furnishing the covers with pictures of themselves trying to emphasize the stamp of intelligence on their plump faces.

In my opinion, development projects should be solely aimed at utilization of local capacity, both natural and human, and at creating adequate conditions for returning of migrants. National finances and resources will be sufficient for that. The problem is rooted in the fact that it is always easier for clueless managers to keep begging for loans and grants instead of establishing fair environment for small and medium business development or designing needed projects envisaging minimal involvement of foreign experts who are used to seeing "African type of development" everywhere.

In the meanwhile, Yagnob receives no support from the outside apart from a few tons of humanitarian flour every year. Why on earth should various foundations and non-governmental organizations be interested in starting their activities in such remote mountainous areas where one has to walk from time to time and where results will be as plain as the nose on your face.

Since it proves difficult to find teachers for local kids why is it that our gallant non-governmental activists will not apply their volunteer resources to this task. All the more so, since it was the need for such work that was the main justification for their spawning, that is registration with the Ministry of Justice, particularly after mid-90's.

Having reached the picturesque village of Kashi, we examined and sketched down the existing settlement and land use system which on the whole had not undergone any significant changes for the last 2000 years. After all, Sogdians - ancestors of Yagnobis, made it into history as excellent farmers. And now, their descendants manage to grow wheat at elevations above 3000 meters!

One cannot help admiring their skills in construction of labor consuming and complex irrigation systems and techniques of terracing steep mountain slopes. The highlanders grow wheat, barley, and potatoes that can produce heavy yields in this area. But Yagnobis, despite scanty yields of grains, invest most of their time in growing grain crops, which researchers see as a tribute to the Sogdian cult of bread. Animal husbandry is of limited nature here but the constantly increasing grazing of their own livestock and that from outside has caused a dramatic increase of erosion, impoverishment of soils and landscape degradation in general.

Kashi population is typical like in any other village of the valley. Here, small houses are made of flat stones. They have flat earthen roofs and are situated, as distinct from contemporary villages in Pamir, Darvaz and Karategin, high up from the riverbed in places protected from the impact of rock-falls and avalanches, on the so-called "breakwalls". The houses are very tidy if quite low. They have practically no windows. There is usually a high threshold and a minimum of adornments and superfluities. On the whole, singular modesty and temperance in life, clothing, decoration of houses, eating, etc is a characteristic feature of Yagnobis.

Yagnobis never drink alcohol; they do not smoke and use of various medical herbs found in Yagnob is very prevalent. One of house owners, Abdujabor Odinaev, invited us for a lunch. Odinaev is a sturdy man a little over 60. Whenever he smiles one can see two rows of perfectly healthy teeth. The same goes for his 13 living children of the 16 born.

Having had our lunch we went down the mini-HPP that supplies power to the village across the river. Even the Soviet system failed to provide power supply to Yagnobis. And here we are - low power and primitive as they may be, mini-HPPs supply electricity to all villages of the valley except Bedef.

Yagnobi experience in this respect might be useful for all remote populated areas of our mountainous republic. Without going into lengthy reasoning about advantages and disadvantages of projects designed during the period of "developed socialism" and still waiting for hundreds of millions of dollars to resume, it is obvious that one tenth of their costs would be enough to fund construction of

manufacturing facilities that could be producing thousands of mini-HPPs badly needed in hundreds of villages and settlements.

Naturally, the so-called environmental organizations do not even attempt at realizing consequences of implementation of those large-scale projects. Valeriy remembered as one senior official in construction of a similar facility proudly answered the question as to whether there were any objections from the general public: "We shot all the greens long ago..."

It is amusing to watch how one of the former opponents of construction of Rogun HPP in late 80's is now vigorously turning a penny in projects promoting this construction, which provides him with a good opportunity to purchase another apartment in Moscow.

I noticed that Yagnobis like most highlanders have inquisitive minds and pretty good makings in the technical area. In the next village of Pskan we got acquainted with a local resident Rahmathon who had only 4 grades of education. Unaided, Rahmathon managed not only to install several mini-HPPs, but also a satellite dish in his house which receives hundreds of channels, the quality of reception being so good as to stir up envy on the part of Valeriy, an indigenous resident of Moscow. In my opinion, people of the village have run into a major problem now: constant arguments about which of the numerous channels they should watch. Rahmathon gave us a donkey and with its help our trip to the uppermost and the most densely populated village in the valley, Kirionte, was much faster and more fun. There is another, still unpopulated village of Novabad, further upstream and after visiting that village we headed downstream along the left bank of the Yagnob, having decided to postpone investigation of the most high-mountain and unpopulated part of the valley until the next year.

In the village of Garmen we stopped to draw a breath in the house of Sangimurod who is well-known throughout the valley. He proved his reputation by being very laconic and specific. Being a member of a security escort team in the Soviet times and having witnessed a lot of unfairness with regard to detained and convicted persons during his years of service, he made a vow never to work for a state like this. He will not accept humanitarian aid. He believes that it should be given to disabled people only. Sangimurod believes that a person should never be idle and always work to the full extent of his power. While he and several other farmers can grow enough wheat to meet their consumption needs, others have to bring in from outside up to a half or one third of flour consumed by them together with other necessary products such as salt, butter and sugar. Sangimurod specifically emphasized the problem of medical service availability and employment of women. Indeed, handicraft industry is poorly developed whereas there are literally tons of wool lying about left over after sheering of multiple flocks of sheep. It could be possible to organize collection and processing of the wool and in this area technical assistance and microfinancing on the part of international organizations and private capital would be useful.

We discussed with him, like with other Yagnobis, possibilities of tourism development and particularly ecotourism that could bring reasonable incomes to local residents. In this connection it will be necessary to overcome the centuries-old habit of spreading dastarhan before tourists without charging them anything.

Shepherds and tourists, either foreign guests or mountaineers for the CIS countries, often abuse our highlanders' hospitality (and not only theirs) literally eating them out of house and home, and taking generous treat they receive for granted. Sangimurod, as an example, referred to an old man living by the road. After the death of his son the old man raises his grandchildren all by himself and in the meanwhile he has to feed tens of passing by shepherds and tourists who never stop to think that they make the old man to sacrifice his own food and time as well as that of his children, thus further devastating the poor as it is household.

For example, hundreds of thousands of Tajik citizens travel abroad every year in search of employ-

ment. They make themselves liable to deprivation and humiliations on the part of law enforcement authorities of the destination country that easily enrich themselves at the expense of the unfortunates who do not see their families for many months. At the same time, having come back home those labor migrants easily blow off all their savings within a few days on various “tuys”, “oshi-nahors” (celebrations), etc.

They cannot think of any other course of action since all of their neighbors and elder relatives traditionally do the same thing.

Starting from early childhood people are being impressed that they can marry only relatives and that marriages must be arranged by parents. They also think that a good job can only be found with relatives or by backstairs influence. These as well as many other factors have been affecting many generations depriving them of personal intrinsic freedom and belief in the fact that it is knowledge and honesty that ensure stable employment and true independence in life.

Turning back to Yagnob, it is my opinion that despite the lack of state support to resettlers, the highlanders must acknowledge themselves as full fledged and absolute owners of their valley and ancestral lands. All the more so since in absence of land ownership right some of the more “sophisticated” Yagnobis obtain lease rights to many hectares of the valuable land, which leads to misunderstandings and resentment. The valley residents need to organize themselves without waiting for administrative decisions to be taken. The UNDP and Aini district khukumat should provide assistance in organization of an international conference and establishment of a local self-governance body or a Supervisory Board (for example) that could, first of all, address the issue of the road construction and payment of pensions.

Although the pension amounts are often quite small, old people in Yagnob cannot receive them for years because of the huge number of different documents they need to produce and high costs of travel to meet bureaucrats.

To preserve natural and cultural environment of Yagnobis ensuring, at the same time, economic benefits for them, it is imperative that a natural and ethnographic park is established as soon as possible. All the more so, since back in 1991 an initiative group comprising members of the Tajik socio-environmental union and staff of the State Committee for Nature protection, having secured support from the executive committee of Aini district, started development of a feasibility study for establishment of Fan-Yagnob natural and ethnographic park.

My former colleagues and I were lucky to head those and other activities aimed at establishment of national and natural parks, for example: Pamir and Shirkent parks established in 1989-1992. 1989-91 was a wonderful period when under the leadership of the selfless and honest politician and the real man (who tragically perished during the civil war), Munavvarsho Nazriev, protection of nature was delegated to genuine enthusiasts and professionals selected on competitive basis for their knowledge and honesty. I can remember the amount of labor and persistence that he invested in laying down the groundwork for the public nature protection service overcoming hot and strong resistance of forestry officials and all kinds of “operators” whose idea of nature protection was limited to extracting bounties of nature and extermination of argalis in exchange for foreign currency.

Documents and concepts defining boundaries of Yagnob park, containing zoning data and draft statutory documents have been collecting dust for some time now in private and public archives. The only thing that is needed now is commitment on the part of government authorities. After all, while spending money on celebration of memorable and poorly justified historical anniversaries and construction of fashionable architectural extravagancies we should not forget about the existing genuine heirs of Sogdiana.

The Russian Ambassador to RT, Ramazan Abdulatipov, is also aware about the unique highlanders' area. He expressed his full support for the idea of preservation of Yagnob and the Yagnobi language with the possibility of involvement of researchers and experts from the Russian Federation within the framework of the International Foundation for support of Mountainous Territories being currently established on the territory of the CIS countries and with support from the International Academy of Highlanders' Philosophy.

Using Yagnob as an example it could be possible to change in a dramatic way attitude towards such remote areas of the republic and breathe new life into them. Introduction of ecological and economic zones and taxation "paradise" for remote and the poorest parts of the republic will make it possible for them to break the cycle of centuries-old backwardness and generate sustainable incomes from ecotourism and growing ecoproducts.

Issues related to establishment of new natural parks are within the authority of the Tajik national park administration. And the latter should, in principle, be mounting more active work, apart from its trips abroad and printing of booklets, to turn parks on paper into real ones. It remains for us to hope that the president of the country and its government will support efforts of the public and professionals aimed at creation of the natural and ethnographic park in order to preserve the ancient language and this unique area.

Brimming over with impressions we were walking back to Margib. Having failed to hitch a ride but with our rucksacks considerably lighter now, we were heading for Fan lakes wherefrom Valeriy would go back to Rogun, but this would be a completely different story...

*PS. Without denying the need for assistance from international organizations we believe that a greater part of this task (if not all of it) could be handled by private entities and regular urban residents. Apart from direct investment in tourist camping sites, holiday hotels, production of souvenirs, etc, Yagnobis badly need textbooks, fiction books for children, and writing utensils. They will gratefully accept anything that can facilitate their life under those harsh conditions. Should there be any enthusiasts and sponsors among the readers of our newspaper, **we** will be only too happy to advise them how to do this directly.*

