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# Caravan route to the Muztagh Karakoram

by Edward F. Noack

**On the upper part of the former Central Asian Caravan Route between Chinese Turkestan and India lies Nubra, a forbidden land close to a sensitive frontier. After two years of negotiation E. F. Noack was allowed to visit this area. Here, he describes his journey and its rewards**

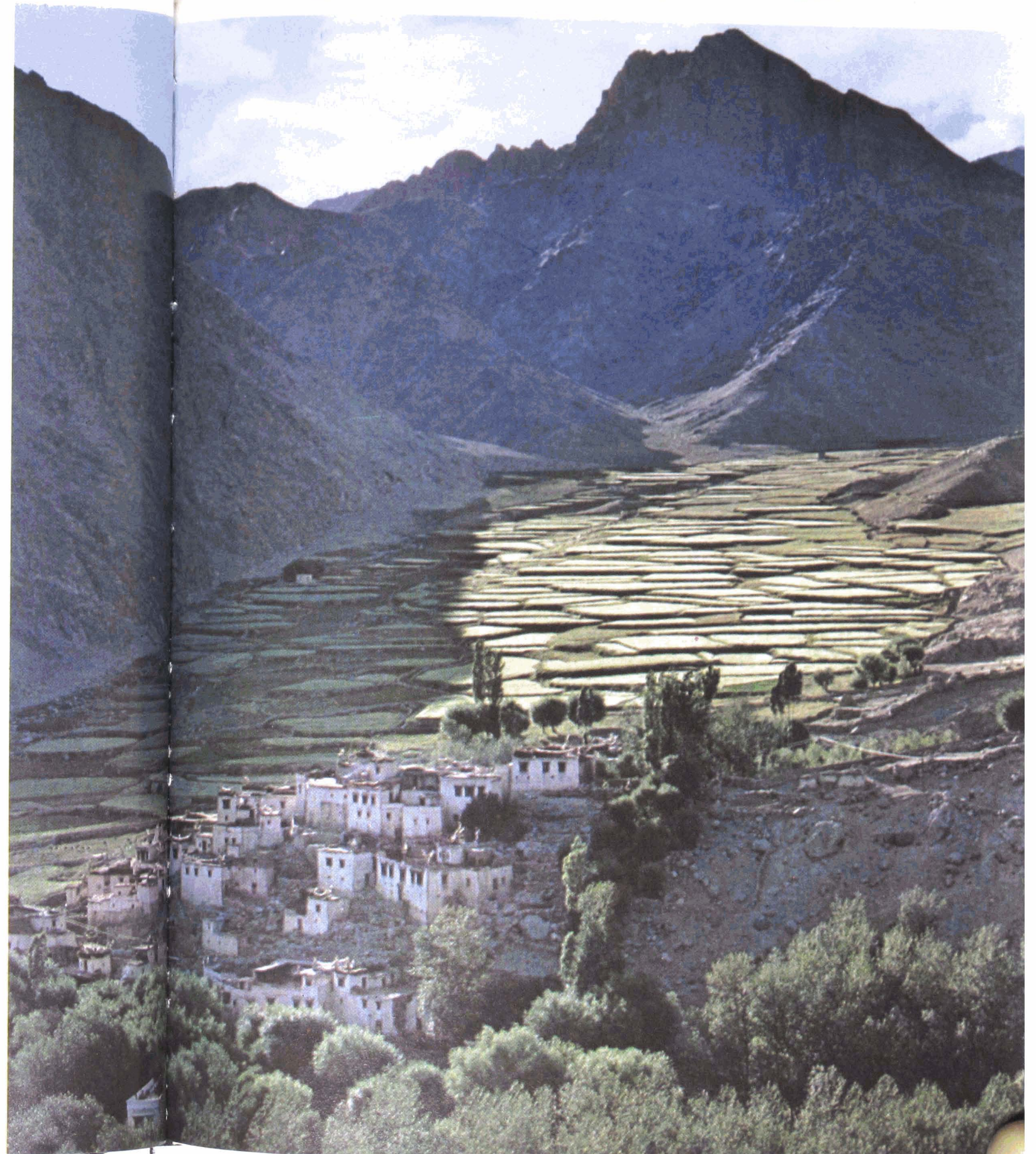
OUR LADAKHI DRIVER had travelled the old Central Asian Caravan Road between Chinese Turkestan and India so often that he knew every bend and dip of it. We were on the famous trade route at daybreak in late August headed for the upper Nubra Valley and the Muztagh Karakoram not far from the Sinkiang Frontier of Chinese Turkestan. There were nine in our group including my family, our liaison official and linguist, our cook and bearer.

While climbing a steep, sinuous hill track to Khardung La, 5611 metres above sea level and the first lofty pass of seven between Leh in Ladakh and Yarkand in Sinkiang, we were confronted with a huge boulder slide which blocked our way. Two years of planning and meetings in Delhi and Srinagar with India's officialdom including the Prime Minister and her staff, which eventually produced permits to enter Nubra's restricted areas, seemed fruitless. Our driver scurried off on foot towards the pass apparently hoping to find a sentry at his nearby outpost. Two hours later he returned with a large military road crew who had been at work nearby. With brute force and a measure of skill they soon provided a passable opening and we were able to continue.

Khardung Pass crosses the Ladakh Range through a snowfield and glacier that extends several hundred metres into the Shyok-Nubra highlands. The view ahead was remarkable and it was amazing to see the vast extent of the Shyok-Nubra watershed realm and the magnificent heights of snow-bound Karakoram-Himalaya rising precipitously above the river valleys. In the distance we identified the white icy massif of Saser-Kangri, 7672 metres, not far from our planned base camp at the lonely village of Panamik. Khardung was one of the three dreaded passes of seven crossed by Central Asian caravans.

Every fertile delta in the Shyok and Nubra valleys is cultivated provided that water from the glacial streams can be diverted to provide irrigation. Using only primitive implements native labourers have skilfully shaped the hillside into terraces (right) which give rich yields of crops

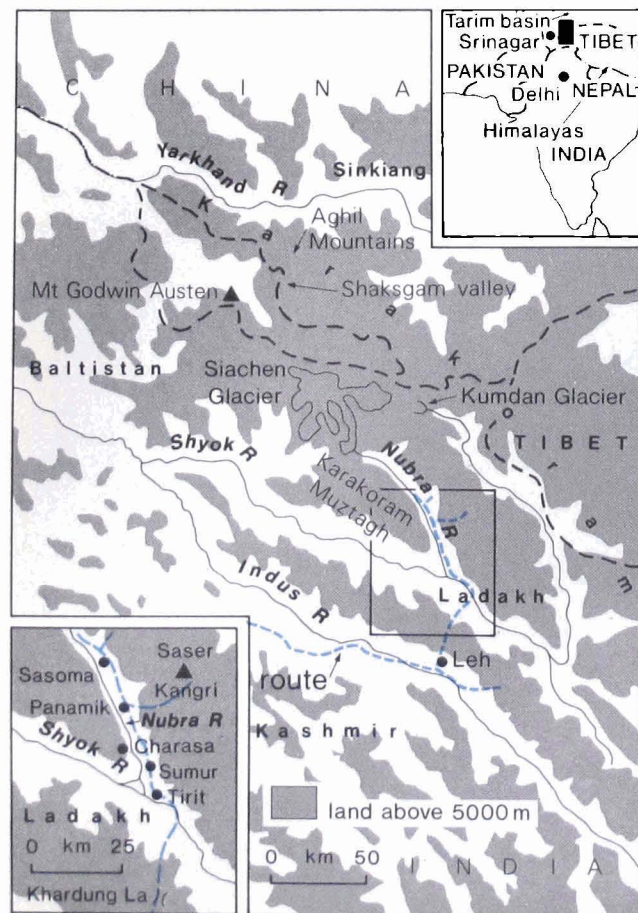
Travel along the former Central Asian Caravan track was fraught with hazard. A rock slide blocked the road in Khardung La and passage in Nubra Valley was hindered by quicksands and flooding from glacial melt. (Below) rescuing the jeep from a mire at the side of the track







During the Last Ice Age the Siachen Glacier covered the entire Nubra Valley to a depth of 1220 metres and left evidence of its existence on canyon walls high above the valley plain. The lower Nubra River is a network of streams and quicksands.



Descending and driving rapidly past several small glaciers and into a luxuriant growth of vegetation, including alpine wild flowers, we entered a rimrock defile which emptied into the turbulent Shyok River. Every fertile fan and delta, deposited over the canyon floor by a glacial stream discharging through a rocky cleft in the Great Karakoram, is a masterpiece of agricultural cultivation by native villagers using crude hand implements. Following along the Shyok's left bank for six kilometres we came to the Tirit cable suspension bridge built by the Indian Army to span the fast flowing river and replace a similar structure of an earlier vintage that had been washed away by flood waters in 1926. Kumdan Glacier in the Muztagh had advanced across the upper Shyok Valley forming an ice dam which burst and released the impounded waters down river for 480 kilometres wiping out villages, farmlands and bridges, inundating Nubra Valley up to Panamik where several caravans were destroyed.

After crossing the dubious structure spanning the raging Shyok at flood stage, the road ended and we were forced to follow the caravan track marked by willow poles set up at intervals through a flooded plain near the confluence of the Shyok and Nubra Rivers. Without warning we plunged into a deep channel but our driver again proved his worth and we were soon back on dry land. Our surroundings convinced us that we had arrived in a strange new world - vast distances, sky-piercing peaks, unusual vegetation and people with a tendency towards Mongol features. Some stared at us with apparent fear in their eyes. Soon a long *mane*, prayer wall, appeared, indicating that we were still in the land of the Lama. Carved prayer stones covering its surface and a stately chorten rising at each end mean that you

must pass with the wall on your right to gain credit for your rebirth. The magical Tibetan prayer 'Om Mani Padme Hom' is repeated, over and over, on every carved stone.

Sumur, a former small village and caravan camping ground was soon seen. Only at the mouths of ravines, on the fans and deltas of fertile soil, brought down by glacial melt, do these widely scattered hamlets exist. Perched atop a cliff, high above the few stone and mud dwellings of the inhabitants, is the imposing Samtanling Lamasery, by far the largest, oldest and grandest sanctuary in the remote Nubra Valley of the yellow hat sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibet formerly extended into what is now Ladakh and even into adjoining Baltistan. Nubra once played an important role in the commerce and trade between Lhasa in Tibet and the west and although this intercourse exists it has diminished greatly.

The head Lama of Samtanling offered greetings with the usual salutation, 'Jooley', the equivalent of 'good day'. He led us through Samtanling's innermost sanctuary, chapels and altars, with intricate carvings on wooden beams, columns and wall panels portraying painted images of gods, demons and animals. Each and every true believer is urged to become thoroughly familiar with the bizarre creatures he is destined to meet as he wanders along the path of transmigration, after death, towards attainment of Nirvana. The painted images on the walls, the mysterious darkness of the chapel with its shadows of devils and demons and the strong aroma of burning incense have a restraining influence on pious believers ambling through the sanctuary.

Reluctantly, we hastened onward to set up base camp thirty-two kilometres ahead at Panamik, where the true wilderness of the ice-bound Muztagh Karakoram begins. Beyond, the snow fields and glaciers of the Saser are reached and the caravan trail takes on the appearance of 'a path of death', strewn with the bleached carcasses of yaks, ponies and camels, partly exposed above the snow where they fell, exhausted, in the thin air of extreme altitude. From Panamik it was eighteen days march at high altitude and in biting cold to the next habitation in Sinkiang, China, and twenty-six days to Yarkand. It was the closing of these frontier passes that ended the caravan trade.

Charassa, a stately and ancient hamlet, appeared across the Nubra River a short distance away. Its small populace lives on a gigantic, isolated boulder near the river's bank. The enormous boulder is known as a 'roche moutonnée' - a relic of the last ice age. Our liaison official informed us that, in the dim past, the village was an important centre where the hereditary rulers of Nubra lived. An ancient Lamasery stands at the highest point and this was a former palace of the nobility.

The great Siachen Glacier covered the Nubra Valley to a depth of 1220 metres and extended from near Mt Godwin Austen in the Muztagh Karakoram down the Nubra Valley to its junction with the Shyok River - about 160 kilometres. Subsequent melting has reduced the Siachen to seventy-seven kilometres of slowly moving ice but it is still the largest glacier outside Polar areas. All around us there was evidence of this formidable ice mass, left after the retreat of the last great Ice Age which extended over Central Asia to the latitude of Kashmir - lateral moraines, grooved and polished boulders and striated canyon walls.

The following morning we met the Amban, village headman, who led us through Panamik, the most northerly point of Nubra if not the whole of Ladakh. It was a small delightful village resembling one of the tiny farmstead



Native of Nubra (above) follows a simple life style in which the village blacksmith has the only dental skills - ruthless extraction. (Below) Nubra womenfolk







Samstanling (left) is Nubra's most luxurious Lamasery. Formerly a part of Western Tibet, and still occupied largely by Tibetans, Nubra Valley and its Lamaseries remain under the influence of Tibetan culture and commerce. (Below left) arrival of the author's party was heralded by two musicians. The weird, resonant sounds only added to the exotic atmosphere generated in the sanctuary by burning incense, darkness and religious carvings. Golden Buddha (right) was one of many objects of religious art which decorate the interiors and outer walls of the Lamasery. Kitchen (below) is situated in a separate stone building in the Lamasery compound. Only males may participate in the preparation of meals and in kitchen duties.

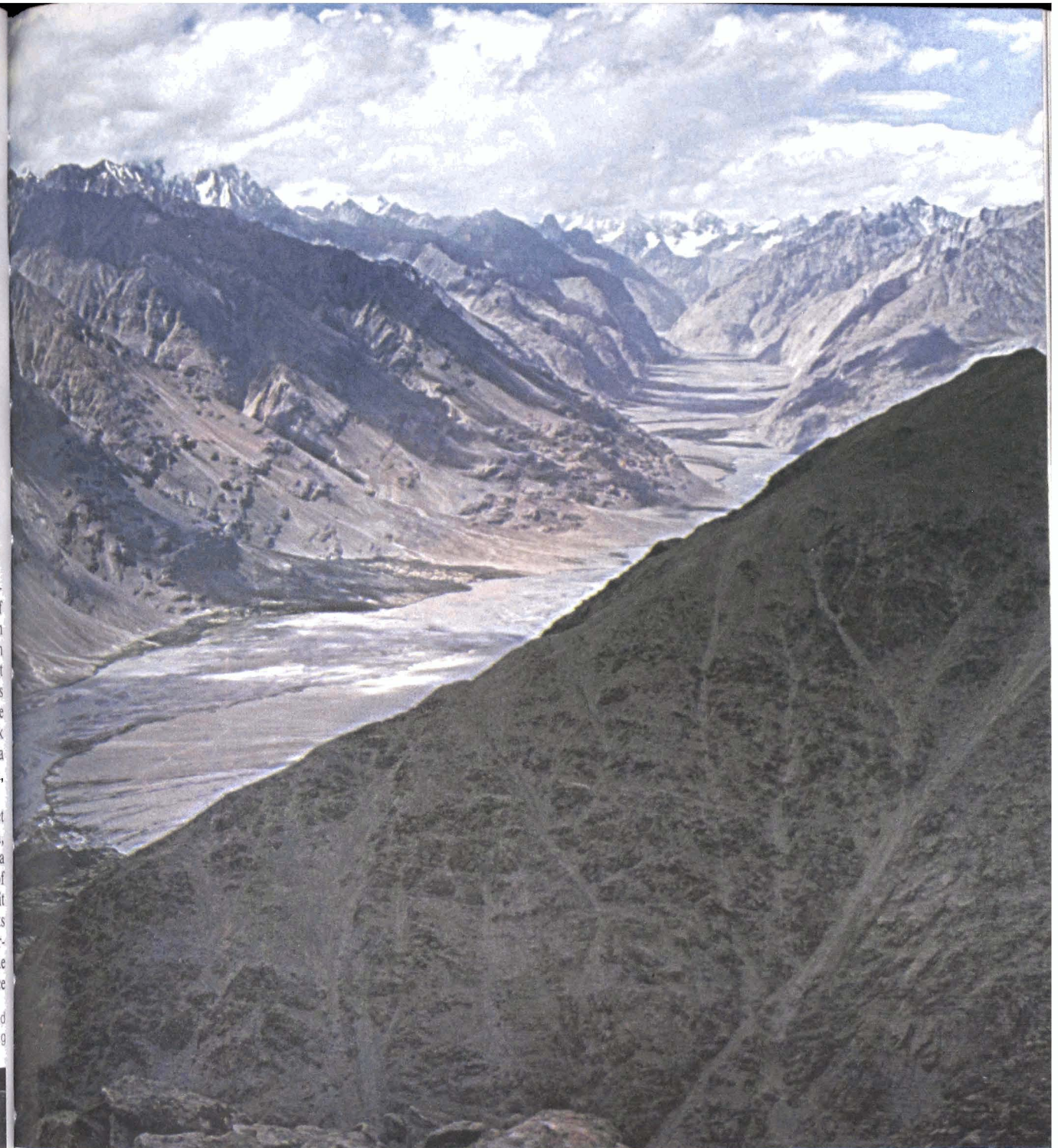






Travel by jeep was no longer possible beyond Panamik, the last settlement before reaching the oases of Turkestan in Western China. The rest of the journey was accomplished by foot and on ponyback. Stony glacial streams (left) crossed the path between Panamik and Sassoma but were preferred to the perilous quicksands found on the lower Nubra.

Source of the Nubra River is the Siachen Glacier (right). The glacier is seventy-seven kilometres long and is flanked by the Muztagh Karakoram range which has many peaks in excess of 8000 metres in height.



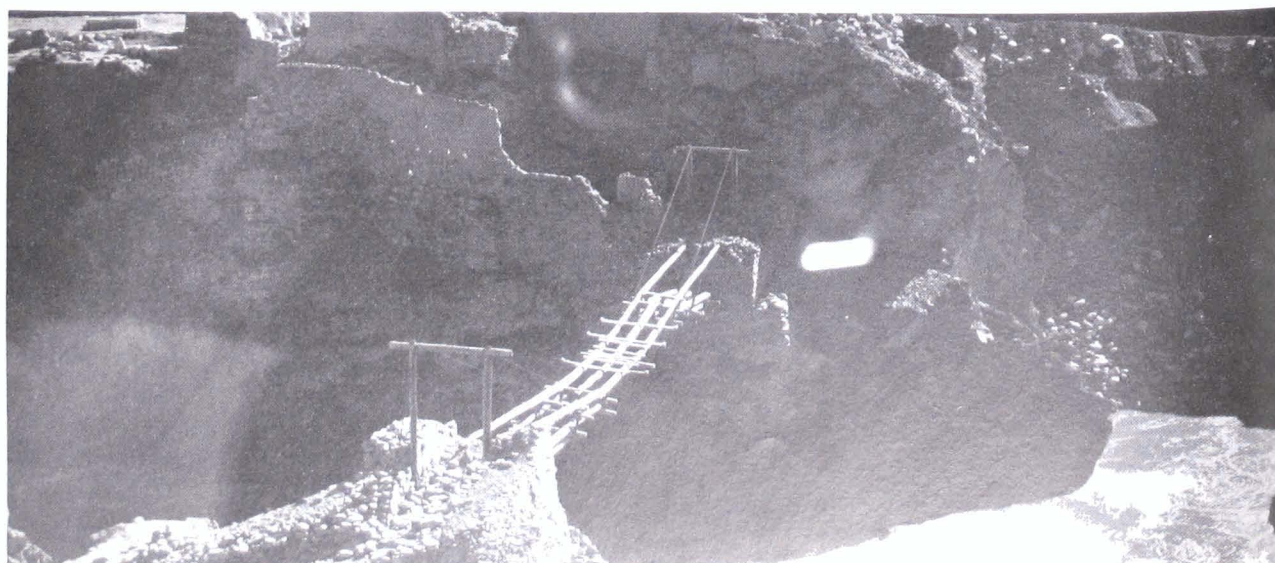
communities of the Swiss Alps and situated on an alluvial fan. A small stream gathered surface sewerage from the dwellings and wandering livestock, and irrigated a luxuriant growth of fruit trees, gardens, wild roses, willows and poplars, as well as farmplots to feed the community. As the last habitation on the Central Asian trade route before the lofty passes and ice-bound wastes en route to the oases of Chinese Turkestan, it was a prominent and timely stopping place. It was also the advanced base of the remarkable expedition to explore the inaccessible Shaksgam Valley and Aghil Mountains of the Muztagh Karakoram led by Major Kenneth Mason, Superintendent of the Survey of India and in 1927 Gold Medallist of the Royal Geographical Society of London.

Beyond Panamik we relied on ponies and trekking to reach vantage points from which we could explore and observe the remarkable heights and glaciers. The entire Nubra Valley and upper Shyok is a forbidden area of Ladakh. We were approaching the extremely sensitive north-eastern frontier where limits had been placed on our

venturing beyond certain landmarks and we were determined to observe our orders faithfully. An objective of our visit to upper Nubra was to explore its rugged canyon where it narrows into a steep craggy gorge in the Muztagh and, if possible, to make our way to the terminus of that greatest of glaciers, the Siachen, and what is left of its fossil ice after eons of melting and disintegration. The Muztagh is a primitive region separating the Nubra-Shyok Valleys from the Tarim Basin of Sinkiang, China. It is a land of stone and ice, almost entirely devoid of vegetation, animal life and settlement. Here, man has to be a nomad.

Ponies and bearers were hired in Panamik and we set out for an old caravan camping ground, Sassoma, thirteen kilometres away, to determine whether the Nubra River was safely fordable through its gorge to the foot of the Siachen. Although we had been advised in Leh that it was not safe to cross at that time of year because of its swift current and its perilous quicksands we were determined to make a site inspection. Our route followed the old caravan trail. On arriving at Sassoma, a mere glance

Few bridges have been built across the Nubra and Shyok Rivers and survived destruction by floodwaters. Dilapidated structure (below) over one of the few narrows in the Nubra Valley was by-passed by the author in favour of a safer crossing



up the gorge was convincing enough to rule out any possibility of making a way upstream by a succession of fords. We had no time to await the autumn freeze more than a month ahead and could not negotiate the almost vertical stony walls leading up to Siachen's terminal moraine only twenty-nine kilometres away. This discovery was utterly discouraging but we were rewarded by the magnificent panorama through the gorge and into the towering heights of the Muztagh. However, from contour maps of the Karakoram we had discovered an alternative approach via the canyon's east flank above Panamik to a ridge at an elevation of 5500 metres.

Our early morning climb started with great anticipation. On reaching the ridge the view was breathtaking.

Peaks, pinnacles and ice-bound vales of the Saltoro Range appeared endless as we gazed in amazement over the western horizon. The true Muztagh Karakoram with its many 8000-metre heights, of which we had only a limited glimpse from Sassoma, stood out in bold relief in the northern sector under bright midday sunlight. While 7672-metre Saser Kangri on the eastern flank was only sixteen kilometres away, a view of its massive ice-bound summit was obstructed by a stony rim only 100 metres away. Although snow and below-freezing weather set in for the night and had not abated by morning we had not been defeated for we had explored the entire fascinating Nubra Valley to its northernmost extremity - a rare privilege in a lonely and forbidden sector of high Asia.