

REVISITING DORAH PASS: A CULTURAL AND STRATEGIC CORRIDOR BETWEEN CHITRAL AND CENTRAL ASIA

Ali Akber Qazi

Ph.D. Scholar, Area Study Center for Central Asia, University of Peshawar

akbarkazy@uop.edu.pk

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ABSTRACT

This research paper explores the historical and contemporary significance of the Dorah Pass, a strategically located border in the northwest of Chitral, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa. The Dorah border connects Pakistan with Afghan-Badakhshan, which then provides direct access to Tajikistan and other countries in Central Asia. Also known locally as the Shah Salim or Shaisidim, the Dorah Pass lies approximately 485 km from the capital city of Islamabad and has historically served as an ancient Silk Route, facilitating mass migration, trade, and religious movements. The pass continues to hold cultural relevance even today, with communities on both sides sharing deep-rooted ways of life and traditions. This study aims to offer a comprehensive overview of Dorah's cultural, historical, and geopolitical importance for Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia.

Key words: Dorah Pass, Chitral, Central Asia, Badakhshan, Wakhan Corridor, Silk Road, Cross-border Trade, Cultural Heritage, CPEC, Strategic Connectivity

INTRODUCTION

Chitral now comprises two districts in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan, and is surrounded by some of the tallest mountain ranges of the Hindukush, located in the extreme north of Pakistan near the Afghanistan border. Chitral has remained an independent princely state for centuries, with its own economy, language, and culture. During British colonization in the late nineteenth century, it became part of British India. It was a princely state until 1947, when it acceded to Pakistan. The rule of the Mehtar (ruler) ended in 1954, and authority was then exercised by the political agent stationed in Chitral. The state merged as a district with Pakistan in 1969. Chitral has nearly 32 subsidiary valleys connecting to the main city through various routes. Valleys such as Broghil, Laspur, and Arkari are very remote, and residents face difficulties accessing basic facilities. The distance and isolation also pose challenges for administrative control over these scattered areas. Located in the far north, it is an area of heavy snowfall, and most parts experience harsh

weather, especially in winter. Historically, Chitral has been inhabited for thousands of years. Its residents belong to over a dozen different cultures and speak more than 12 languages and dialects. The primary language of Chitral is Kohwar (Chetrari language), and Urdu is also used as the national and official language. Other notable local languages include Wakhi, Yidgha, Pashto, Dameli, Kalasha, and Gawarbat. Due to its strategic location and historical ties with Central Asia, its material and non-material cultures reflect several Central Asian influences. According to the 2017 census, Chitral's population was approximately 497,800.

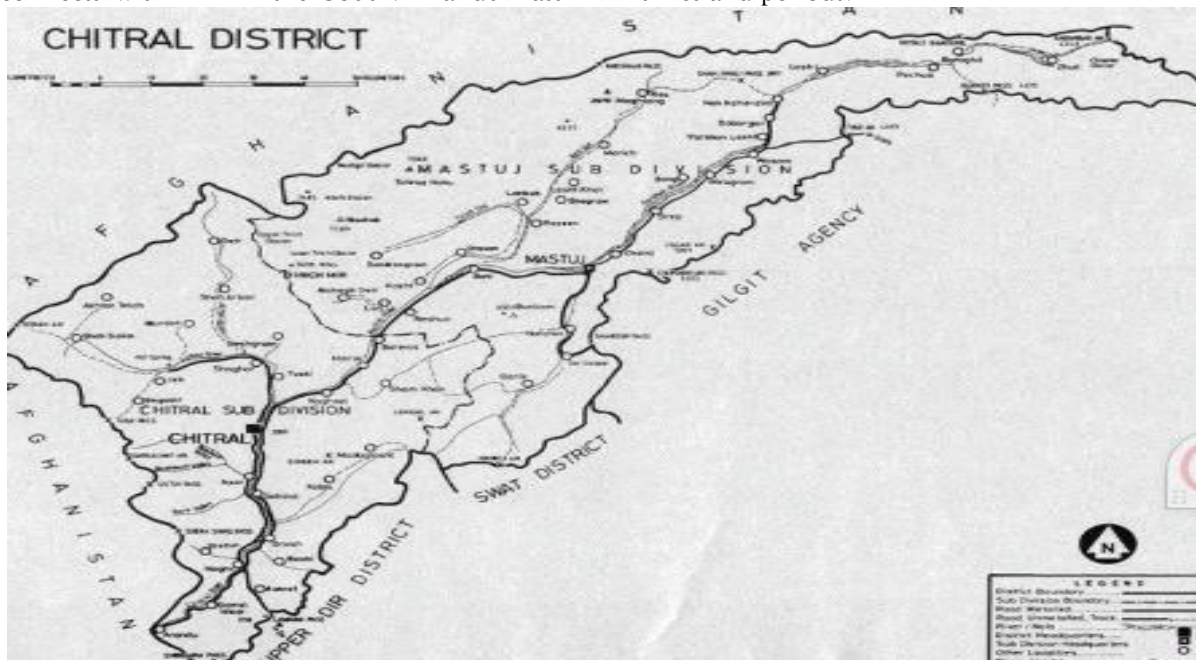
Like Sawat, Hunza, Gilgit, and other beautiful valleys in Pakistan, Chitral also has tourist attractions, and thousands of tourists and explorers visit Chitral every year. Particularly, the presence of the ancient Kalash community in Chitral is a major blessing for the region, drawing a large number of national and international researchers, explorers, and tourists. If the area's infrastructure is improved, we will see a

significant increase in the number of tourists visiting Chitral and its surrounding areas.

Chitral's Border Passes

Chitral shares approximately 30 borders with its surroundings. Starting with the Dorah Pass and Broghil Pass, which connect Chitral with Badakhshan (the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan) in the North, Shandur Pass connects with Gilgit-Baltistan in the Northeast. As the map of the Chitral region below shows, it borders Swat in the East, and Lawari Pass connects with Dir in the South. Arandu Pass

links with Kunar (an Afghan province) in the South, while Begusht and Kalasha Valleys connect with Nuristan (another Afghan province) in the Northwest. Besides these well-known passes, there are several smaller passes like Akram Pass, Anogole Pass, and Birzin Pass that have been used by migrants, invaders, preachers, and tourists throughout history. Among all the passes, Dorah, Broghil, and Arandu have been the busiest for centuries. These routes have been frequently used for various purposes such as trade, preaching, and migration during different times and periods.



Dorah Boarder: A Historical Background

As mentioned earlier, Dorah has historically been the busiest, closest, and safest route for the Hajj caravans, invaders, traders, travelers, migrants, and preachers traveling between Central Asia and Pakistan. Its elevation is nearly 14800 ft /4112m, and it is located along the Durand Line border, crossing the Hindu Kush Mountain range (Faizi,1991). According to a detailed letter written in 2020 by Mr. Wazir Zada, former Provincial Minister for Minorities, to the Federal Minister for Communications, and the provincial survey report, the distance from Islamabad to Eshkashim (the border town of Tajikistan) via the Chitral Dorah Pass is almost half (560 km) of the distance compared to the Islamabad-Torkham-Kabul-Tajikistan route (1050 km). Constructing a tunnel at Dorah Pass would further decrease this distance. These reports also reveal that, to connect with Central

Asia through Dorah Pass, 85% of the route crosses Pakistani territory, while in the case of Torkham, 77% crosses Afghan territory, making Dorah an ideal point for connectivity. Additionally, the Government of Pakistan and the CPEC authority have decided to build an alternative CPEC route through Chitral via Shandur. In this context, the proximity of the Dorah border will create broader opportunities for economic ties between China and Central Asia. (Interview with Mr. Wazir Zada, Ex. Provincial Minister, KPK)

One of the strengths of this border is that it is very close to populated areas on both sides. In Chitral, the nearest village to Dorah is Shah Salim Gobor, about 20 km away, while Sanglich Badakhshan (the closest populated area on the Badakhshan side) is roughly 40 km from the main border. Mr. Sultan Mehmood, who previously served as the Provincial Community

Development Manager with AKDN in Badakhshan and often traveled through the Dorah Pass, shared that someone leaving on foot from Gobor Valley early in the morning can reach Sanglich by evening. However, traveling by vehicle, the trip from Shah Salim (Chitral) to Sanglich (Badakhshan) takes about four hours.

A well-known researcher, traveller, and linguist, Morgenstern (1929), who had visited Northern Areas and Chitral, writes, "From Shah Salim, I ascended the Dorah Pass (14800 feet), one of the most important Hindu Kush passes. The Dorah is quite easy, and the distance between inhabited places on both sides is not very great" (p.44).

Historically, numerous accounts indicate that this route was part of the ancient Silk Road, connecting Central Asia with China and its surrounding regions. In addition, people living on both sides of the border have shared similar cultural heritages, traditions, and way of life, which indicates their long-standing relations through this border. Ancient sources indicate the influence of some major early religions in Chitral, especially Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Kalasha, which had access to Chitral and Gilgit through key borders like the Dorah and Broghil.

A very credible source, an old book, *Hudud al-Alam*, written in 372/982AD on Persian geography, provides comprehensive information about the utilization of the Dorah and Broghil passes. The mentioned book, which is translated by Minorsky (1930), says, "Once in Shughnan (usually merged in Vakhn), the merchants could follow up the stream or cross into Chitral and Gilgit by the well-known passes in the Hindukush (Dora and Baroghil)" (p.364). It evidently shows that in the 10th century these passes were being used by the traders, and this process of communication, transportation, and travel has continued throughout history. Another Central Asian expert, Wood J., 1841, in his book (*A Personal Narrative of a journey to the sources of the river Oxus, by the route of the Indus, Kabul, and Badakhshan*), while discussing this long trading relationship, says,

.... with forty iron pots ...loaded [on] five yobus [packed horse], and made his way to Chitral. Here he [Trader] readily disposed of them, and after investing part of the proceeds in honey, started for the Chinese frontier... where he [trader] safely arrived and sold his Chitral

investments to such advantage that he cleared fourteen times the value of his original venture—the forty cast-iron pots. (pp. 290-91)

Besides invasions and business purposes, this border has also been used by famous saints, mystics, and religious preachers in different periods of time. As mentioned earlier that the presence of a few old religions in Chitral has been verified by many prominent historians and writers like Karl Jetmar (1996), Faizi (2005), Ghufran (1962), Cacopardo Brothers (2001), Baig (2004), and Najeeb (2000). It reveals the arrival of respective preachers from Central Asia to Chitral and Northern Areas to spread Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Kalasha beliefs because it is clear that Central Asia and ancient Persia have been the centers for the spread of these major religions. Most historians agree that, like other ancient religions, Islam also entered Chitral first time from Central Asia through a famous Central Asian Fatimid Ismaili *Dai*, philosopher, and Traveler, Nasir Khusraw, in the 11th Century via the Dorah border. The *Astana* (Ziarat) of Nasir Khusraw in Garam Chashma Chitral is one of the strong pieces of Central Asian religious influence and shared ritualistic expressions.

In addition to this, we see, different tribes of Chitral had mostly migrated from Badakhshan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, still having their family historical connections with their respective areas, and share common cultural heritage. Their historical connections and travels have also been maintained through these important borders, i.e., Dorah and Broghil. According to Amin Mohammad (a writer and social worker), during the 20th century, a prominent historical figure of Chitral, Sher Afzal, an exiled brother of the ruling Mehtar, utilized the Dorah Pass to launch an attack on Chitral with the backing of the Afghan monarch, Amir Abdul Rehman. Despite its historical significance, this strategically vital border remained largely overlooked in global discourse until it first drew international attention during the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Road Construction and Trade Relations in the 1980s and early 90s.

During the former Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in the 1980s, the Dorah border played a key role in facilitating the *Mujahideen's*

resistance against the Soviet army. As a native of Garam Chashma, Chitral, the author of this paper witnessed the situations and events that unfolded during the 1980s and early 1990s. At that time, Pakistan, in close collaboration with the United States of America and some Arab countries, supported the *Mujahideen* in pushing back the Soviet forces from Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was not only an attack on a sovereign nation, but it also posed an existential threat to Pakistan. As Pakistan shares a 2640 km-long border with Afghanistan, the risk of the Soviet war expanding to Pakistan was strongly felt. Therefore, Pakistan's alliance with the US and some Arab nations supported the *Mujahideen's* resistance. Dorah was one of the busiest borders used by the *Mujahideen* to fight against the Soviet forces. This was the time when millions of Afghans migrated to Pakistan through different borders, including Dorah. During the late 1980s, two major ammunition camps were established in Garam Chashma, Chitral, strategically positioned near the Dorah border. These camps served as major supply hubs for providing weapons and logistical support to two different fighting groups in the Badakhshan province of Afghanistan. The author also recalls the catastrophic explosions that destroyed both camps, claiming precious lives of over 40 people working and living near the camps.

During late 80s and early 90s, a jeepable road was constructed from both sides and there was a bilateral business continued, for instance, Afghan used to bring livestock, gemstones, Lapis Lazuli, styrax, utensils, carpets, handicrafts, herbal medicines, and a few edible things to Garam Chashma, on the other hand they used to purchase almost all human necessities like food, cooking oil, sugar, rice, fabrics, etc. According to a report published in a credible online newspaper, Chitralnews, the Dorah (Gobor) route was the largest source of revenue collection for the district council in the form of octroi tax. Till the 1990s, full-loaded vehicles used to travel from Garam Chashma to different parts of Badakhshan, mostly Faizabad. Local drivers used to travel to Afghan-Badakhshan daily, and there was no restriction on any kind of movement. One of the well-known transporters, Mr. Nawab Khan, currently serving as the Chairman of the Village Council, shared his experience as a frequent traveller between Garam Chashma and

Badakhshan in an interview: "It used to be an almost 14-hour journey from Garam Chashma to Faizabad in Badakhshan. Drivers would load various goods into their vehicles and navigate rough, bumpy roads to reach their destination. The route was generally safe and hospitable in terms of security. I recall several occasions when our vehicles broke down along the way, yet we never encountered any security threats." (Interview with Mr. Nawab Khan, Chairman Villag Council)

Contemporary Situations and Govt. Initiatives

The utilization of this border has always been subject to the relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan. Since the USSR's collapse, this border has remained partially closed while local communication, trade, and travel have continued from till 1997. Inayatullah Aseer, a well-known social worker, reports that in 1992-93, under the guidance of Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif, the Government of Pakistan conducted an extensive survey from Chitral to Eshkashim, Tajikistan, in which he participated in the mission as the Manager of Administration. The team traveled by jeep from Chitral to Faizabad and onward to Eshkashim. According to him, the total distance from Chitral to Eshkashim is approximately 200 kilometers. This initiative resulted from the first bilateral discussions between the two countries aimed at connecting Tajikistan to Gwadar via the Dorah Pass following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later, in December 2010, Pakistani President Asif Ali Zardari and Tajik President Emomali Rahmon met on the sidelines of the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO) summit held in Turkey. They agreed on exploring various modes of regional connectivity, with the Chitral-Tajikistan route identified as one of the key options. Unfortunately, these important initiatives could not be completed due to political instability and external interference.

During the year 2019, the Provincial Government took the initiative to work on the two cross-border trade. i.e., Arandu and Dorah in Lower Chitral, which, due to security concerns and the Taliban's invasion of Afghanistan, did not take practical implementations. (Interview with Mr. Sartaj, Former Tehsil Nazim of Chitral). Furthermore, one important aspect that should not be ignored is that these kinds of initiatives

cannot be realized without ensuring security clearance. This is a harsh reality in a country like Pakistan, which faces significant security concerns on various borders, and it is not easy to make decisions quickly regarding any political and economic relations without addressing security measures.

Conclusion and Recommendations

No one can deny the strategic importance and historical significance of Dorah, keeping in view the contextual realities and contemporary political situations. It shares one of the shortest and safest borders with Badakhshan, which is one of the richest provinces of Afghanistan in terms of minerals and other natural resources. This also connects Pakistan with Central Asian republics

via Tajikistan by crossing the very shortest distance in the Wakhan corridor. The Government of Pakistan and its business community not only have significant commercial opportunities in the Badakhshan region, but such engagement could also open new horizons for trade and economic cooperation with the Central Asian Republics.

We can create direct sustainable business linkages with Central Asian Countries, which are rich in natural resources like Gas, Minerals, and Petroleum. On the other hand, Pakistan can have exchange business opportunities like medicines, fabrics, food items, petrochemicals, automobile lubricants, and fruits, etc., which have a high demand in Central Asian countries.



Secondly, connecting the Dorah border with the CPEC route will definitely open wonderful opportunities for Pakistan to have economic relationships with China and the Central Asian republics simultaneously. As Islamabad-Dorah-Tajikistan is the shortest route, which passes through 85% of Pakistani territory will provide more business opportunities to the people of Pakistan living around the expected connecting route. There have been several official attempts by the government to construct a road from Chitral to Garam Chahsma-Dorah Pass; however, none of them have materialized successfully. For instance, in 2022, the National Highway Authority (NHA) floated a tender for this route with complete details, but the project was abruptly halted without any clear or comprehensive justification.

Thirdly, as it is being said that Pakistan is a cultural extension of Central Asia, this connectivity will also offer huge facilitation to our tourism industry when we create better infrastructure for travel and to appreciate the diversity of culture and traditions. It has been observed that most Western tourists want to explore the old Silk-route and wish to travel to all the connected countries by crossing these borders. Certainly, if we become successful in materializing this idea, it will invite people from different parts of the world, which will have a very positive impact on our economy too.

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Interviewed:

Mr. Wazir Zada (Ex. Provisional Minister)

Mr. Sultan Mehmood (Ex. Provincial Community Development Manager, AKDN, Badakhshan)

Mr. Sartaj Ahmad Khan, Ex-Tehsil Nazim Chitral

Mr. Nawab Khan, (Chairman, Village Council Garam Chashma)

Mr. Inayatullah Aseer (Social Worker, Ayon Chitral)

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