

Chapter 10

Social and economic conditions in the valley of the Bartang River

10.1 Introduction

From 2-12 June 1999, a preliminary regional assessment of the natural, climatic, and socio-economic conditions was conducted in the valley of the Bartang River, downstream from the Usoi landslide dam, and in the lower part of the Kudara River (right tributary of the Bartang River) valley. (Note: In this chapter, all references to "right" or "left" are taken as looking downstream.)

Human development of mountainous areas is usually limited to the valleys of mountain rivers. The territory of the Pamirs offers a dramatic illustration of this tendency; the entire national economic activity is concentrated within the mountainous valleys of six rivers: the Vanj, Yazgulem, Bartang, Gunt, Shakh dara, and Panj, the last of which is not only the main river artery of Tajikistan, but also serves as the southern boundary of the republic. The valleys of these rivers provide sufficiently favourable conditions for development of housing and infrastructure. At the same time, each of the valleys has numerous hazards associated with complicated geological conditions and large-scale manifestations of modern geological processes.

10.2 Development in the Bartang valley

The valleys of the Bartang and Yazgulem Rivers can be regarded as exceptions, when compared to the other river valleys. In contrast to the valleys

of the Vanj, Gunt, and Shakh dara Rivers, which have been fashioned by glaciers and demonstrate wide and sufficiently flat bottoms, the valleys of the Bartang and Yazgulem Rivers have resulted from erosive and tectonic processes. They are characterized by narrow, meandering floodplains and a large number of deep gorges. Their modern riverbeds are bordered by steep, bare mountainsides; the surfaces of these bare and dissected slopes are studded with shifting talus deposits and rock debris. In addition, there are many landslides that narrow, and periodically dam, the bottoms of the valleys.

These special conditions have always hampered the development of the Bartang valley. Inhabited areas are scattered irregularly along the broader sections of the valley, mainly in its lower part. Generally favourable, relatively flat-lying plateaus, which can be found at elevations of 2,600 to 3,200 m, have not been developed because of climatic difficulties and lack of transportation into the areas.

The valley of the Bartang River is still poorly developed. At present it can boast of only 28 settlements, four of which have come into existence in the last 4 to 5 years. The settlements are situated irregularly along the valley. The 11 largest villages are concentrated in the downstream 60 km of the valley (the so-called Siponj inhabited area).

The villages lie at distances of 4 to 28 km from each other. There are often "pairs" of villages that face one another from the two banks of the river.

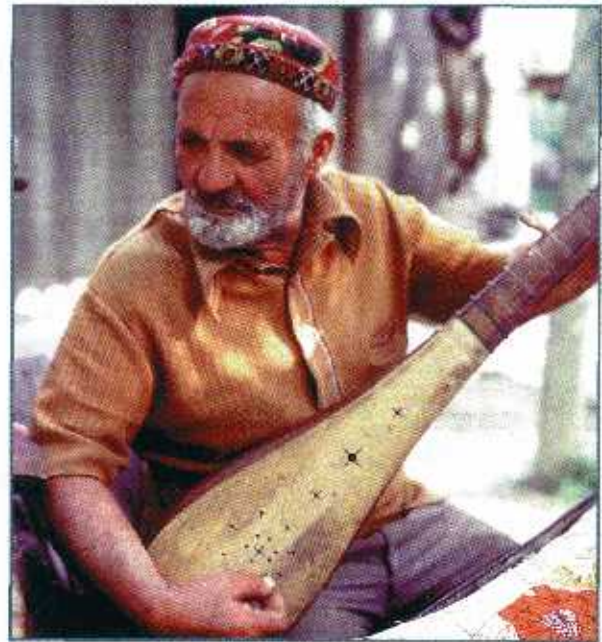
The villages are situated on high terraces of the right bank of the Bartang River above the flood plain, and on debris cones and low terraces of the left bank, which also lie above the flood plain. Arable lands lie either within the villages or nearby.

10.3 Regional transportation

An unpaved automobile road, which runs mainly along the right bank, connects the villages with the district center, Rushan. The bridges and the main automobile road are controlled by the Mountain Societies Development Special Programme (MSDSP), a programme of the Aga Khan Development Network. The most difficult sections of road are those from Shudzhait to Emu and from Hijlis to Bisav. In these stretches, the road undercuts shifting talus deposits, which hamper vehicular travel at all times of the year.

Another inhabited area – the Basid region – occupies a 35-km-long sector in the middle stretch of the valley. It consists of six villages, three of which have come into existence within the last 3 to 4 years. All of these villages, except Chagib, are situated on the left bank of the Bartang River. Only the village of Basid has direct access to automobile communication, because the main road from Rushan to Barchidev passes through this village. Other villages are connected with this road by suspension footbridges.

Areas serving as cropland, both within and outside the villages, are shrinking in size because of encroaching development. As a future prospect, it will be possible to develop a separate outlier of the ancient valley of the Bartang River – the ancient alluvial plateau known as Qll, which lies above the villages of Ajirf and Basid at an elevation of 2,800 to 3,200 m. This plateau lies 250-300 m above the bottom of the valley and the currently inhabited areas, and is practically



without water. Its development can begin only after construction of water-supply channels and redistribution of inhabited areas. The construction of the channels on the plateau above the villages of Basid and Ajirf has already begun with the help of MSDSP, but progress is very slow because of lack of transport, construction equipment, and fuel. Also, the annual construction season is very short. Construction can be undertaken only in summer and – for a short time – in autumn.

Until 5 years ago, the six villages of the Basid region in the central Bartang valley had no automobile connection with the lower part of the valley. Since then, the road has been constructed within a very short period of time by local workers, mainly by hand and with the help of local resources. The condition of the road is controlled by the Hukumat (a provincial government office) of the Rushan district and by the MSDSP. All of the maintenance efforts are conducted by the villagers.

The third inhabited area, from Roshorv to Barchidev, is situated in the upper part of the Bartang River valley. It occupies an area of about 10 km² and includes six villages. One of these

villages – Vijravsh – is made up of only nine households; it came into being only 3 years ago. Roshorv, the largest village, and the village of Savnob lie on the aforementioned ancient plateau of alluvial and moraine origin at an elevation of 2,800 to 3,200 m. The villages of Barchidev, Nushor, and Yapshorv are situated on the bottom and lower sides of the valley.

The villages are connected between themselves and with the district center of Rushan by an automobile road that has been functioning normally for only the past 5 years. At present, this road is controlled by the Tajik Committee on Emergencies. The most difficult sections of the road from Rushan to Barchidev lie between the villages of Chadud and Vijrav. This stretch of road crosses several active landslides and is traversed by several lateral streams. In summer, it is almost impossible to wade across these streams, and make-shift footbridges are washed away every year. During the time of this very mission, two women from the village of Roshorv drowned when attempting to cross Bardara Creek, 5 km upstream from where it enters the Bartang River. They had already made a 49-km downhill trek, when they met their death.

From the village of Savnob, the road passes through the valley of the Kudara River and farther on to Murgab in the eastern Pamir Range.

10.4 Socio-economic conditions in the Bartang valley

The economic and social conditions in the villages in the Bartang valley depend, as the above-mentioned geological and geographical features would suggest, directly upon the following factors:

- Presence and condition of automobile roads through the valley and within the inhabited areas;

- Availability of arable lands;
- Geographic position and climatic conditions of the inhabited areas;

Summarizing all three of these factors, we can see that the farther down the valley, the better the social situation, and vice versa

Potatoes and cereal grains are the most common crops in the region. However, in some years the growing season is too short for the cereals to ripen, and the people of the upper and middle parts of the valley remain practically without bread for 2, or even 3, months before the new harvest. Because there is no all-year transport to the villages of Ajirv and Barchidev, goods are delivered there only occasionally, which makes them very expensive. The high cost of gasoline sends the prices in the village markets even higher. For example, if a liter of gasoline can be purchased in Khorog for 400 Tajik roubles, in the village of Nisur it will cost 1,300 roubles. It is no wonder, then, that food prices in Nisur are three to four times as high as in Khorog. In all villages upstream from the village of Sinoj, individual families have only a small supply of homemade rye flour, and some don't even have that. Most of the villagers eat plant roots and herbs at least some time during the year. Everyone looks forward to this year's (1999) harvest, but there is little hope that the harvest time will come soon because of abnormally low temperatures and extremely heavy precipitation in 1998-1999. During our visit, inhabitants of the villages of Ajirv, Basid, Chadud, Vijrav, Yapshorv, and Roshorv in the Bartang valley, and Rukhch in the valley of the Kudara River, looked even more emaciated than the people in other villages, and their houses were pitiful sights. All of the people were very poorly dressed, and had no fuel of any kind to heat their houses.

10.5 Recommendations for improving the socio-economic status of the people of the Bartang valley

There is no doubt that the present poor state of the inhabitants of the Bartang valley is to a certain extent the result of widespread knowledge of the hazard associated with Lake Sarez and the ensuing lack of well-targeted and proper development. It is also clear that the present situation will remain unchanged until the problem of the stability of Usoi dam is solved. However, it is still possible – and, what is more, necessary – to improve the socio-economic conditions in the region in spite of the threat from the lake. To do so, will require the following actions:

- The government (local, regional, or national) must exercise control over future settlement of the Bartang valley, allowing enlargement of inhabited areas to an elevation of no more than 50 m above the present floor of the valley.
- Encouragement of further development of the high-elevation Basid-Ajirf and Roshorf-Nisur-Ten plateaus.
- Repair and reconstruction of sections of the main automobile road in the Bartang valley, especially in the stretches from Emu to Ajirf and Basid to Yavshorv.
- Construction of reliable suspension bridges across the dangerous streams in the section of the road that connects the villages of Basid and Vijravi.
- Organization of emergency one-time assistance in the form of food and clothing supplies to aid the inhabitants of the villages of Vijrav, Garjiv, Yapshorv, Roshorv, and Barchidev in the Bartang valley, and the village of Rukhch in the Kudara valley, taking into account the financial positions of the families.
- Organization of periodic humanitarian assistance to all of the villages in the middle and upper parts of the Bartang valley, consisting of flour, as well as new kinds of fast-maturing potatoes, rye, and other grain crops.
- Encouragement of the development of traditional national trades, which may become one of the most important sources of income generation in many villages.