

Sebastian Kempgen

THE PLACE NAMED *SURI* ON AFANASIJ NIKITIN'S  
RETURN JOURNEY THROUGH INDIA

1. In four previous papers, we traced the fascinating journey by Russian 15th century merchant Afanasij Nikitin from Tver' to India and back (1468–1474/75). Three of the papers (Kempgen 2008, 2009a, 2009b) were devoted to his route through India itself several stops of which had not been identified before. The fourth paper (Kempgen 2010) was devoted to his journey through Persia; in it, we identified the first stop Afanasij Nikitin made (or was forced to make) after crossing the Caspian Sea, *Čebokar* / *Čapakur*. All of these papers are part of a larger on-going project to publish a diplomatic edition of Afanasij Nikitin's text.<sup>1</sup> In the present paper, we will offer an identification for one of the two stops on his return journey through India, from *Aland* to Konkan coastal port *Dabhol*, that hitherto remained a mystery, namely *Suri/Sur'*, and offer a hypothesis for *Kynarjas/Narjas*.

2. Afanasij describes the return journey he undertook from *Aland* back to the coast very briefly, essentially mentioning only place names: *Kamendrij* – *Narjas/Kynarjas* – *Suri (Sur')* – *Dabyl'*. Except for the well-known harbour, none of the other places had properly identified before. This is Afanasij's full (laconic) account of his return journey to the coast, essentially only three lines of text:

“А ѿ Кельбергу поидох до Коуроули [...]. И тоух бых 5 мѣс[а-  
цев]ъ, а ѿтоуды ж[е] поидох Калики, и тоу же бозаръ велми  
великъ. А ѿтоуды поидох Конакельберга, а ѿ Канаберга  
поидохъ ших Аладиноу. А ѿ ших Аладина поидох Ка-  
миндрѣе, а ѿ Камендрѣа к Нарасу, а ѿ Кынарасоу к Соури. А  
ѿ Соури поидох к Дабили, пристанище великаго моря Ин-  
дѣискаго. Дабыл же есть градъ велми великъ...” (*Troickij  
spisok* l. 390ob)

---

<sup>1</sup> The project page is at <http://www.uni-bamberg.de/slavling/leistungen/forschung/projekte/afanasij-nikitin/>. It offers all papers published so far for download.

In our previous article, we argued that on a plausible route from *Aland* to the *Dabhol* the old city of *Pandharpur* could be identified as *Kamendrij*. The linguistic reasoning behind this was that *Pandharpur* is also known as *Chandra-bhaga*, and *Kamendrij* is a sufficiently close rendition of *Chandra-* 'half moon'. *Pandharpur* also meets other requirements for a route Afanasij Nikitin would have taken – lying at just the right distance from his starting point is one of them, being an old city and hosting many pilgrims is another.

However, the rest of the place names Afanasij mentions could not be explained then: *Narjas/Kynarjas* and *Suri* (*Sur'*) remained mysterious for the time being. We will return to them below to offer a (partly) solution. In the light of our new findings, the route from *Kamendrij* (= *Pandharpur*) to *Dabhol* (*Dabul*) looks like this (Fig. 1):

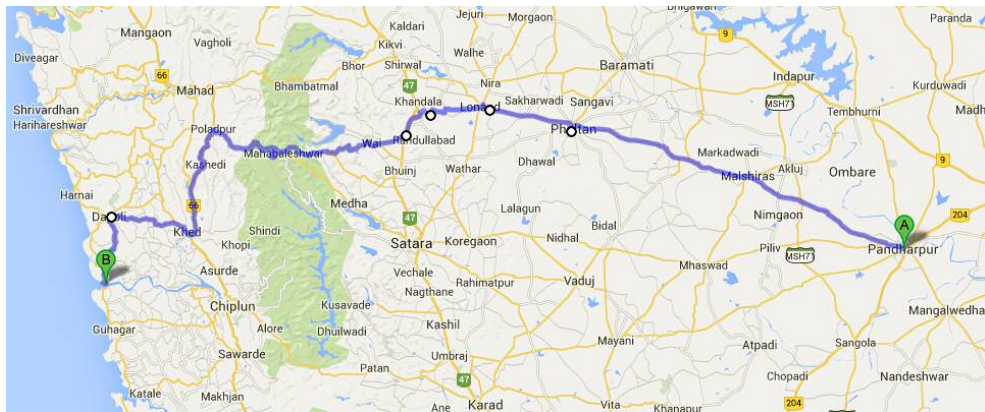


Fig. 1: The Route from Pandharpur to Dabhol

Compare this to the hypothetical line that Semenov (1980) was only able to draw on his map of Afanasij's route (Fig. 2):

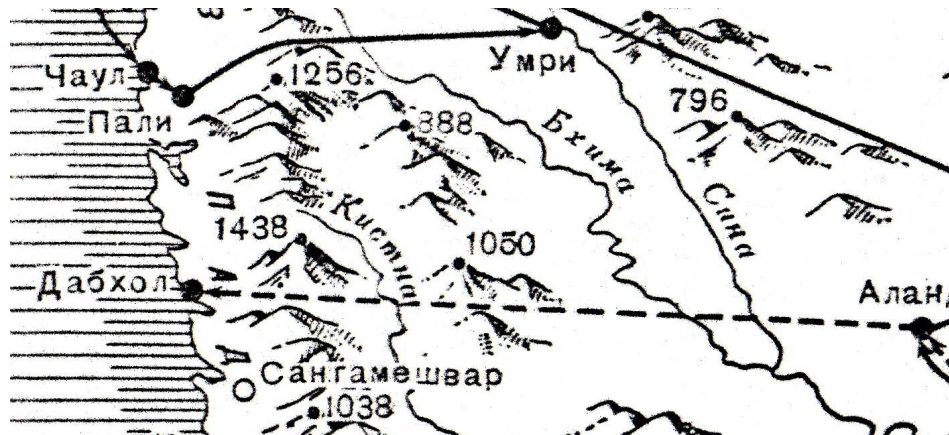


Fig. 2: A Section from Semenov's map (1980)

3. One of the three stops that Afanasij Nikitin on this route is *Suri* (or *Sur'*) – see the original text cited above. Until now, no town or place had been found by that name that could match the order of the stops on the journey. It was noted, however, that *suri* means ‘sun’ in Sanskrit – and thus probably influenced Afanasij when mishearing or misspelling or falsely remembering an actual place name. ‘Sun’, it can assumed, is a word any traveller in India will surely come across, even if not speaking Hindi. In our earlier article, we already assumed that *Suri* must be located in the area of *Satara*, the region’s largest town.



Fig. 3: The route from Surur to coastal port Dabhol

While revisiting some of the web sources we used for our previous papers on Afanasij’s travel through India, we found a modern road map which led to the solution – see an edited version above (Fig. 3)<sup>2</sup>. It corroborates our general as-

<sup>2</sup> Original map: <http://www.konkanyatra.com/images/konkan-road-map.png>.

sumption while slightly revising it. This map shows a place named *Surur* 36 km north of *Satara*. Linguistically, there can be no doubt that Afanasij's place *Suri* / *Sur*' can be identified with *Surur*. Further investigation reveals that *Surur* is a (historic) village, not a city – one possible explanation why it has been overlooked before. On Google Earth or Wikimapia it will only show up when zooming in close to the ground (see Fig. 4; the coordinates are: 17°57'55"N 73°59'4"E). *Surur* is not far away from *Wai*, a historic city with picturesque temples on the river Krishna; today it is well-known for the multitude of Bollywood movies that have been shot there.

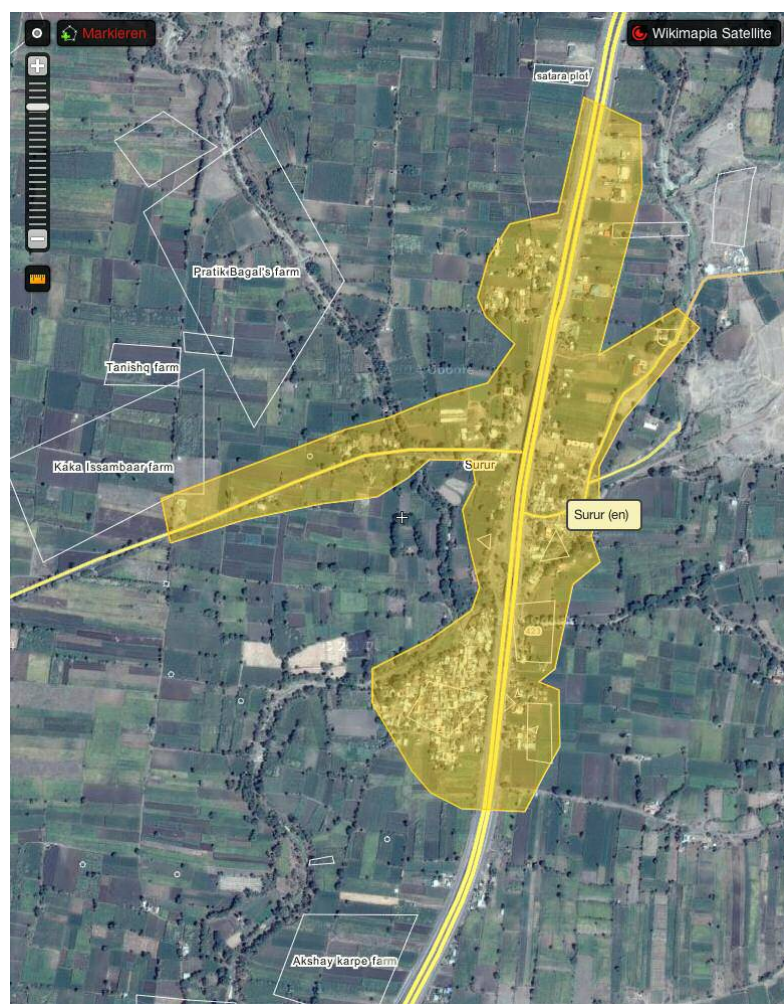


Fig. 3: The Village Surur on Wikimapia

Why would Afanasij Nikitin mention a small place like *Surur* when a nearby city (*Satara*) is much larger and would be a natural stop on his journey? The



answer is, we think, already included in the road map shown above: mentioning *Surur* makes sense (apart from remembering it because of its similarity to the word for ‘sun’) only if taken as the place where the company of merchants travelling together would turn West instead of going further South first.

The Western direction would have led the caravan to the old city of *Mahabaleshwar* (known to exist since the 13th century) and further on to *Poladpur*, crossing the mountain range of the Western Ghats. From *Poladpur*, the route would have led to *Khed* and (probably) *Dapoli*, before reaching the port *Dabhol* from the north. This newly reconstructed route (see blue line in the map) essentially only differs from our previously assumed route in that it reaches the coast using the next mountain pass to the north. The village *Surur* is part of both routes – it simply wasn’t recognized as Afanasij’s *Suri* before.

4. After *Suri* has successfully identified as *Surur*, the question of course remain which city would then correspond to *Kynarjas/Narjas* on the way between *Pandharpur* (= *Kamindrej*) and *Surur* (= *Suri*). Our best guess is that this would be *Phaltan* which offers itself in this function.<sup>3</sup> *Phaltan* (earlier called *Phalapattan*) was the capital of an independent state in medieval times and as such a natural stop for any travellers, the more so for merchants travelling together. However, we could not find any name in conjunction with this city, its buildings or surroundings that even remotely resembles the place name *Narjas* (or *Kynarjas*) as given by Afanasij (resp. the scribes that copied his travel notes). It is obvious that any route between *Pandharpur* and *Dabhol* (totalling ca. 350 km) would include *Phaltan* as an intermediate stop (as, in fact, our previous reconstruction of this route also did), and we are fully convinced that *Phaltan* can be considered a good candidate for *Kynarjas/Narjas*, although no ‘proof’ can be offered at this time for its identification.

Following below are the relevant travelling distances<sup>4</sup> between the stops on Afanasij’s journey back to the coast (with corresponding places mentioned by our Russian traveller):

| <i>Contemporary place names</i> | <i>Places mentioned by Afanasij Nikitin</i> |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Pandharpur – Phaltan: 106 km    | Kamindrej – Narjas/Kynarjas                 |
| Phaltan – Surur: 64 km          | Narjas/Kynarjas – Suri                      |
| Surur – Dabhol: 180 km          | Suri / Sur’ – Dabul’                        |

5. With the newly-discovered *Suri* / *Surur* and its sole merit to be named as a stop on Afanasij’s journey as being the location where the journey turned West

<sup>3</sup> See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaltan> for more information.

<sup>4</sup> All distances calculated using <http://www.distancesbetween.com>.

to cross the mountain range, the last section of his Indian journey can now be revised to reflect our new findings.

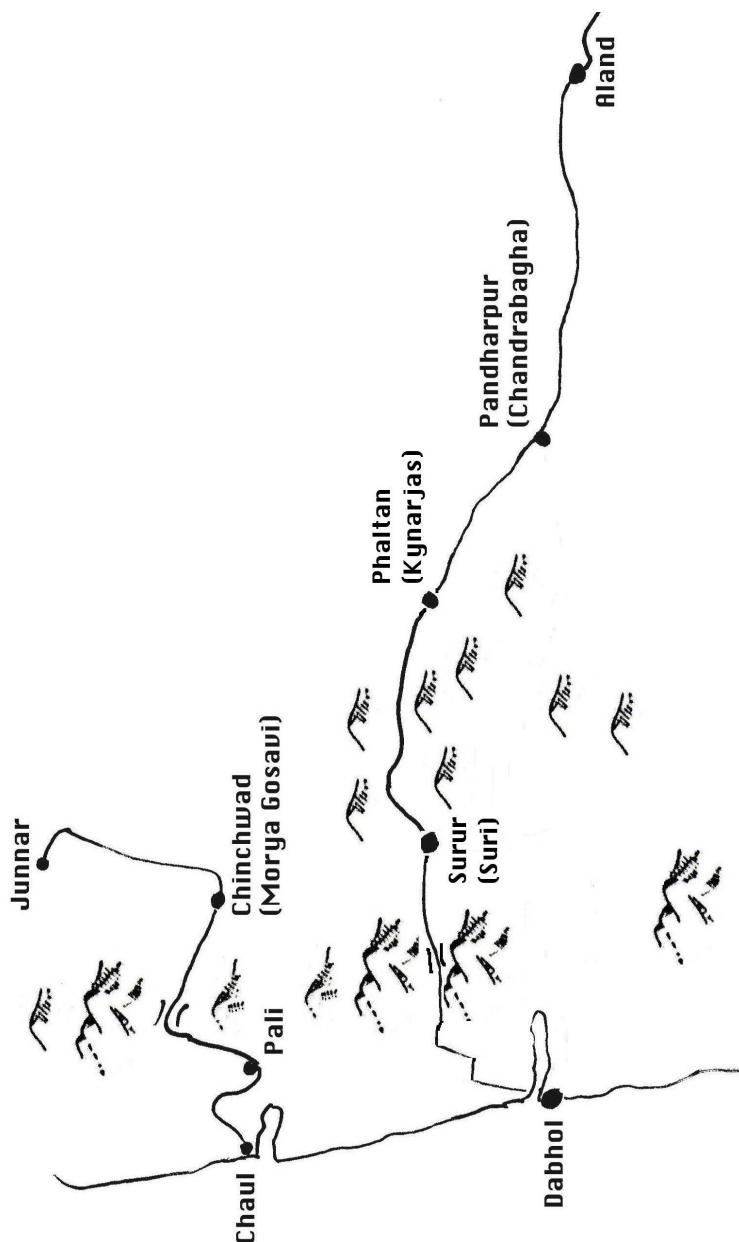
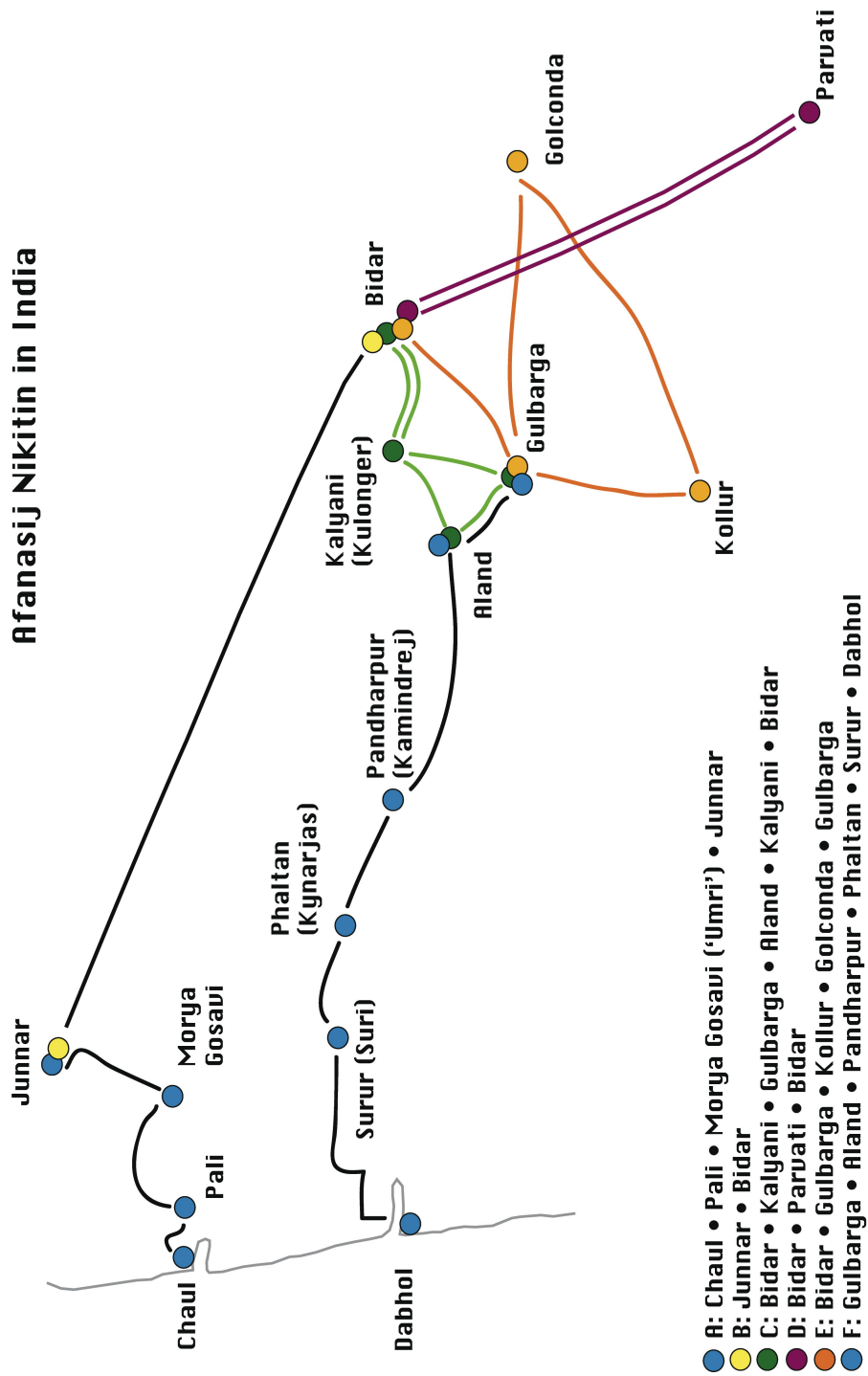


Fig. 4: Revised version of Nikitin's return journey through India

6. Lastly, we would also like to present the reader with an updated version of our complete reconstruction of Afanasij's journey through India. Only the last segment has changed, everything else is identical to the original version published in Kempgen (2009a, 164).



● Ujjayanagar

## Literature

- Afanasij Nikitin 1960. *Xoženie za tri morja Afanasija Nikitina 1466–1472 gg.* Faksimile rukopisi iz Troickoj letopisi. Sost. I.G. Veritë. Poslesl. M.N. Vitaševskoj i S.N. Kumkesa. Moskva.
- Kempgen, S. 2008. Zu einigen indischen Städten bei Afanasij Nikitin: Die Hinreise (Chaul – Pali – Umri – Junnar – Šabat – Dabhol). In: Brehmer, B., Fischer, K. B., Krumbholz, G. (Hrsg.). *Aspekte, Kategorien und Kontakte slavischer Sprachen. Festschrift für Volkmar Lehmann zum 65. Geburtstag*, Hamburg, 249–263. [Some Indian cities in Afanasij Nikitin's travelogue: the onward journey (Chaul – Pali – Umri – Junnar – Šabat – Dabhol)]
- idem 2009a. Zu einigen indischen Städten bei Afanasij Nikitin: Die Rundreisen (Kulonger, Parvat) und Vijayanagara. *Die Welt der Slaven* LIV, 1, 150–164. [Some Indian cities in Afanasij Nikitin's travelogue: the roundtrip (Kulonger, Parvat) und Vijayanagara]
- idem 2009b. Zu einigen indischen Städten bei Afanasij Nikitin: Die Rückreise (Scheich Aladin – Kamindrej – Kynarjas/Narjas – Suri – Dabhol). In: T. Berger et al. (eds.). *Von grammatischen Kategorien und sprachlichen Weltbildern – Die Slavia von der Sprachgeschichte bis zur Politsprache. Festschrift für Daniel Weiss*, München–Wien, 319–333. [Some Indian cities in Afanasij Nikitin's travelogue: the return journey (Shah Aladin – Kamindrej – Kynarjas/Narjas – Suri – Dabhol)]
- idem 2010. „Čebokar“ und die persische Reiseroute Afanasij Nikitins. In: Mendoza, I., Reuther, T. (Hrsg.). *Slavistische Linguistik 2008/2009. Referate des XXXIV. Konstanzer Slavistischen Arbeitstreffens in Oldenburg, 22.–26. September 2008, und des XXXV. Konstanzer Slavistischen Arbeitstreffens in Salzburg, 21.–25. September 2009* (Wiener Slawistischer Almanach 65), München, 2–30. [“Čebokar” and Afanasij Nikitin's route through Persia]
- Semenov, L.S. 1980. Put' Afanasija Nikitina v 1471–1474 gg. na karte Indii. *Izvestija Vsesojuznogo geografičeskogo obščestva*, t. 112, vyp. 3: 210–217.

[All web pages: last accessed Dec. 4, 2016]