

The mysterious place named *Suri* on Afanasij Nikitin's return journey through India

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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.¹

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*.



Beer from Tver', Afanasij's home town

2. Because all of the aforementioned papers were published in German, we will first quickly sum up our findings so far before turning to the newly discovered stop on his journey.

2.1. In the first paper, the author tried to lay out a meaningful way for Afanasij Nikitin to travel from *Chaul* (*Čivil'*), the harbour on India's West Coast, to *Junnar* on the Deccan plateau. On that route, the starting point and the final destination were well-known (*Chaul* and *Junnar*). Of the two intermediate stops, *Pali* and *Umri*, only the first one had been identified before – the village *Pali*. Because *Junnar* is situated on the Deccan (a gigantic plateau of volcanic origin with steep borders) and because a mountain range called "Western Ghats" had to

¹ 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.

be crossed, there is only a limited number of connecting routes from the major coastal towns to inland regions, in medieval times even more so.² Thus, instead of searching similar sounding place names somewhere in India and then laying the route through these stops, old trading and travel routes were examined, the history and importance of cities along the way were taken into account to identify which place it is that he could have stayed. Of course, wherever Afanasij also mentions travelling times or the duration of his stays in certain areas can be calculated by other means, such information was also be taken into account.

“А изъ Чювила пошли есмя сухом до Пали 8 дни, до индѣйскыя горы. А ѿ Пали до Оумри 10 дни, то есть городъ индѣйскыи. А ѿ Оумри до Чюнеира 6 днии...” (*Troickij spisok*, l. 372ob)

On that inward journey from the coast to *Junnar*, and going forward from *Pali* (which took him 8 days to reach), there is really only one route that makes sense for a merchant travelling in group, as Afanasij most probably did. From *Pali*, this route would take the direction first north and then east to modern *Pune*, and just before reaching it, turning north for the onward journey to *Junnar*. It does not seem far-fetched to assume that Afanasij mentions the place where he turned north before reaching *Pune* on his way. The duration of 10 days also supports this assumption. (The journey further to *Junnar* would take him an additional 6 days.)

Afanasij makes special mention of the place name *Umri* because for him this sounds like “die!” (imperative) in Russian. The logical place where one would turn north to *Junnar* after having reached the Deccan plateau would be *Pimpri-Chinchwad* (near *Pune*), also called *Bhosari* because it was an important trading post. Linguistically, there is, however, only a light association with toponyms (place names) in *Pimpri-Chinchwad*. However, when studying Afanasij’s route, i.e. the routes of caravans he joined going from city to city, it becomes clear that all of his intermediate stops were cities boasting important markets or having old temples and thus attracting pilgrims. Once such important temple in *Pimpri-Chinchwad* bears the name of priest *Morya Gosavi* who died one hundred years before Afanasij reached that town. The best guess that we could come up with was that Afanasij misheard or misunderstood the name *Morya* and made *Umri* the place name out of that.³ Remember that at this point, he was travelling in India for less than three weeks. Regardless of all linguistic considerations we consider the city *Pimpri-Chinchwad* to be the missing link on Afanasij’s journey to *Junnar*.

“Чюнеръ же градъ есть на ѿстровоу на каменномъ, не дѣланъ ничимъ, богомъ сътворенъ. А ходать на гороу д[е]нь, по единомуу ч[е]л[о]в[ѣ]коу — дорога тѣсна, [двѣмъ] поити нелзѣ.” (*Troickij spisok* l. 373)

As for *Junnar* itself, we drew special attention to the fact that Afanasij calls the fortress (or city?) to lie “on an stoney island” while ‘in reality’ it doesn’t. As it turns out, Afanasij Nikitin might tell us two different things here in these two sentences, and not describe *one* situation, as has mostly been assumed. First, even today geographers sometimes call the remarkably steep rocks characteristic for the Deccan plateau “islands”, and the old temples of *Junnar* indeed reside on such a rock formation. First fortifications on the rock (today called *Shivneri*

² See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Ghats for more information and many impressive photographs.

³ Today, there is also a park named *Moraya Raj Park* nearby.

fort) had been built during the century before Afanasij visited the city. Only one of the two paths leading up the cliff, however, is being described as a “little difficult” and would probably fit Afanasij’s description (if he wanted to describe the way up that rock), but not the main entrance through its “Seven Doors”, the more so if a fort had recently been built, with anti-elephant spikes at the entrance.⁴

Second, there is indeed a famous narrow old path leading up the steep slope to the surface of the Deccan plateau itself, reaching it at a point called *Nane Gath* (near *Ghatghar*). This path was part of an old trading route and a toll post. Today it is still known as a tourist attraction in the region, being some kilometres away from *Junnar*⁵. What is not completely clear in Afanasij Nikitin’s text is whether the “mountain” that he refers to in his second sentence is identical to the “island” mentioned in the first sentence, or not.

2.2. In the second paper, we tried to reconstruct the return journey that Afanasij undertook from *Aland* back to the coast. The description of this part of his journey is very brief, essentially mentioning only place names: *Kamendrij* – *Narjas/Kynarjas* – *Suri* (*Sur’*) – *Dabyl’* none of which 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[ацев]ь, а ѿтоуды ж[е] поидох Калики, и тоу же бозарь велми великъ. А ѿтоуды поидох Конакель берга, а ѿ Канаберга поидохъ ших Аладиноу. А ѿ ших Аладина поидох Кааминдрѣ, а ѿ Камендрѣа к Нарѣсу, а ѿ Кынарѣсоу к Соури. А ѿ Соури поидох к Дабили, пристанище великаго моря Индѣйскаго. Дабыл же есть град велми великъ...” (*Troickij spisok* l. 390ob)

In the article, we argued that on a plausible route from *Aland* to the *Dabhol* where crossing the mountain range of the Western Ghats was again necessary, the old city of *Pandharpur* could be identified as *Kamendrij*. The linguistic reasoning behind this was that *Pandharpur* is also known as *Chandrabhaga*, 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 (even today⁶) 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 through *Satara* and *Khumbarli Ghat* which we assumed to be the “default route” to the coast can now be revised.

⁴ See http://balsanskar.com/english/lekh/7_shivneri-fort.html for more information, and the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3eb-y8QM-xQ>. To get a very good impression of what Junnar countryside looks like, see <http://myodysseys.com/Trips/Maharashtra/Junnar/Junnar.html>.

⁵ See the excellent photographs on https://www.flickr.com/photos/ruturaj_v/ to get an impression of the Deccan plateau in general and especially the Nanegath pass; these photos confirm Afanasij’s description letter by letter: that the path is narrow and that two people cannot walk side by side.

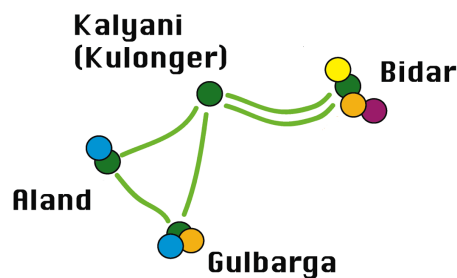
⁶ See the paper by KULKARNI (2014) which takes the Alandi – Pandharpur pilgrimage as one of its examples.

2.3 In the third paper, we tackled to the problem of properly reconstructing the round-trip that Afanasij made in India, from and to Bidar, a capital and large marketplace. From the place-names that he mentions in his travelogue, *Aland* (*Shah Aludin*) and *Gulbarga* (*Koluberg*, *Kel’berg*; officially called *Kalaburagi* today) were always clear, while *Kulonger* (*Kulungir*) wasn’t – and thus the reconstruction of Afanasij’s round-trip missed an important element.

А ис Чюнерѧ есма вышли на оупение пр[ѣ]ч[ис]тые к Бедерю к больше-
му их градоу, а шли есма м[ѣ]сѧцъ, а ѿ Бедерѧ до Коулонкерѧ 5 днии, а
ѿ Коулонгерѧ до Кельбергоу 5 дни. [...] ѿ Чювила до Чюнейрѧ 20 ко-
вовъ, а ѿ Чюнеирѧ до Бедерѧ 40 кововъ, а ѿ Бедерѧ до Колоуньгерѧ 9
кововъ, а ѿ Бедерѧ до Колоубергоу 9 кововъ. (*Troickij spisok*, fol. 374/374v.)

...
Приидохъ же в Бедеръ ѡ заговѣнѣ о филиповѣ ис Коулонгѣрѧ... (*Troickij spisok*, fol. 377)

We could show that the place Afanasij Nikitin calls *Kulonger* can be identified with *Kalyani* (since 1956: *Basavakalyan*). *Kulon-* is Afanasij’s rendition of *Kalyani*, while *-ger* is a typical second part of a compound places names in Sanskrit, the same as either Slavic *gora* ‘hill’ or as Slavic *gard* ‘fort, town’. Identifying *Kulonger* with *Kalyani* (*Basavakalyan* of course also includes this name as the second part of its name) made it possible to fully reconstruct and understand the ‘round-trip’ that Afanasij undertook. This paper also included a new map of his complete journey through India. Below is the section showing the round-trip.



Afanasij’s round-trip from Bidar via ‘Kulonger’

3. On his journey back to the Indian coast, one of the three stops that Afanasij Nikitin mentions 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 be 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.

While revisiting some of the web sources we used for our previous papers on Afanasij’s travel through India, we found a new map which presented the solution – see the edited map below⁷. It corroborates our assumption.

⁷ Source for the original map: <http://www.konkanyatra.com/images/konkan-road-map.png>.



The route from Surur to coastal port Dabhol

This map shows a place named *Surur* 36km 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 village, not a city – one possible explanation why it has been overlooked before. On Google Earth or maps it will only show up when zooming in close to the ground. On Wikimapia it can also be found; it is being described with the following line: “*Surur* is very Historic Village, also called *Wai phata/ mahabaleshwar phata*”.⁸ Below (see next page) is the section from Wikimapia showing this village.

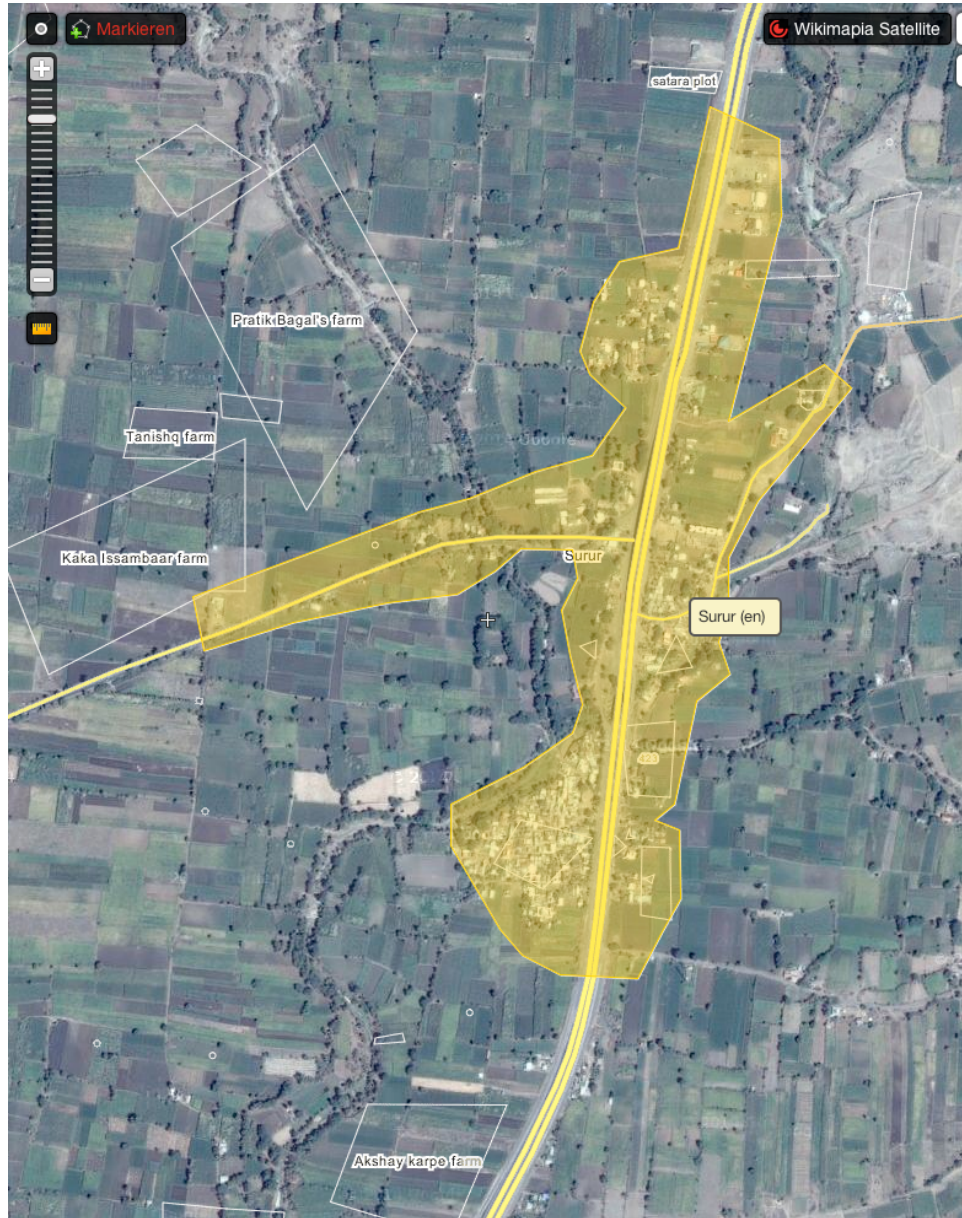
Why would Afanasij Nikitin mention a small place like *Surur* when a nearby city (*Satara*) is much larger and would be a natural stop on his journey? The answer is, we think, already included in the road map shown above: Mentioning *Surur* makes sense (apart from remembering it because of its similarity 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.⁹ The Western direction would have led the caravan to the old city of *Mahabaleshwar* (known to exist since the 13th century)¹⁰ 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*,

⁸ See <http://wikimapia.org/16412558/Surur>.

⁹ On his whole “Journey beyond three Seas”, there is another instance where Afanasij mentions an otherwise unknown and unimportant village as a place where he spend some time, and not a well-known city: this is *Čebokar* at the southern coast of the Caspian Sea. In another paper, we were able to identify *Čebokar* with the village *Chubukanda* (written ‘Tschubukende’ in German sources) near *Gäz* (see KEMPGEN 2010).

¹⁰ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mahabaleshwar> for more information.

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.



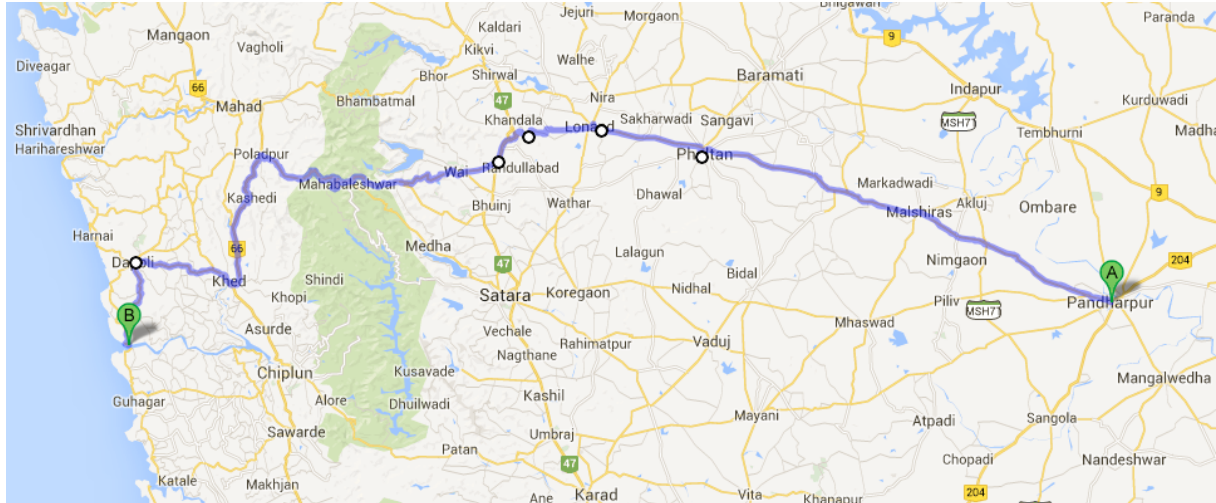
Village Surur on Wikimapia

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* (see the map on the next page) which offers itself in this function. *Phaltan* 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 in some sort of caravan.¹¹ However, we could not find any name in conjunction with this

¹¹ See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phaltan> for more information.

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 for this identification.



Route from Pandharpur via Phaltan to Dabhol

5. Following below are the relevant travelling distances¹² between the stops on Afanasij’s journey back to the coast (with stops corresponding to places mentioned by Afanasij in bold type):

Contemporary place names

Pandharpur – **Phaltan**: 106 km
Phaltan – Lonand: 30 km
 Lonand – **Surur**: 34 km
Surur – Mahabaleshwar: 44 km
 Mahabaleshwar – Poladpur: 41 km
 Poladpur – Khed: 40 km
 Khed – Dapoli: 27 km
 Dapoli – **Dabhol**: 28 km

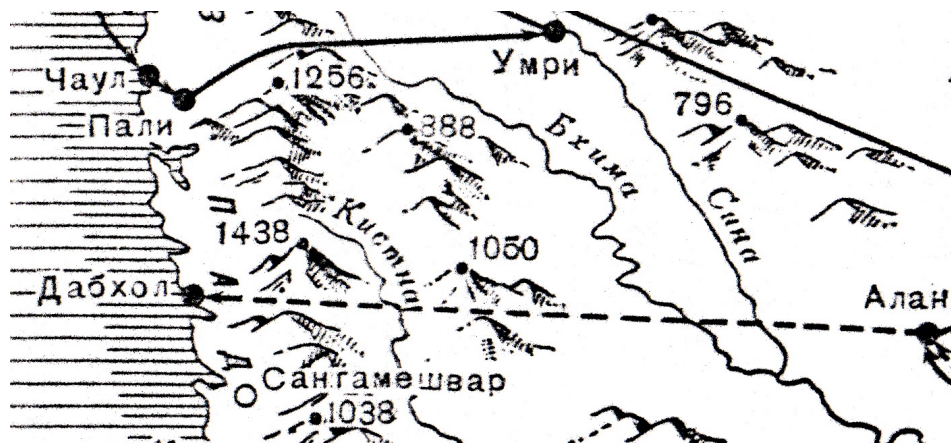
Places mentioned by Afanasij Nikitin

Kamindrej
Narjas/Kynarjas (?)
Suri
Suri / Sur’

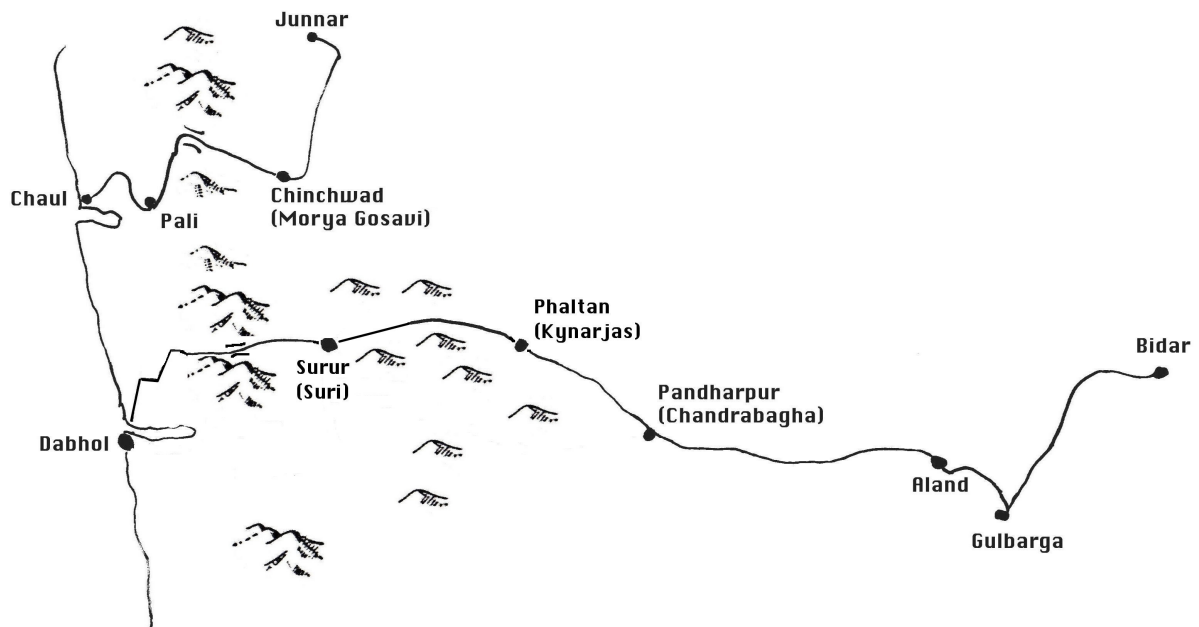
Dabul’

6. 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 to cross the mountain range, the last section of his Indian journey can now be revised to reflect our new findings. Below, we present the appropriate section from SEMENOV’s map (see SEMENOV 1980). He is able to draw a straight line only from Aland to Dabhol, because none of the intermediate stops had been identified.

¹² All distances calculated using <http://www.distancesbetween.com>.



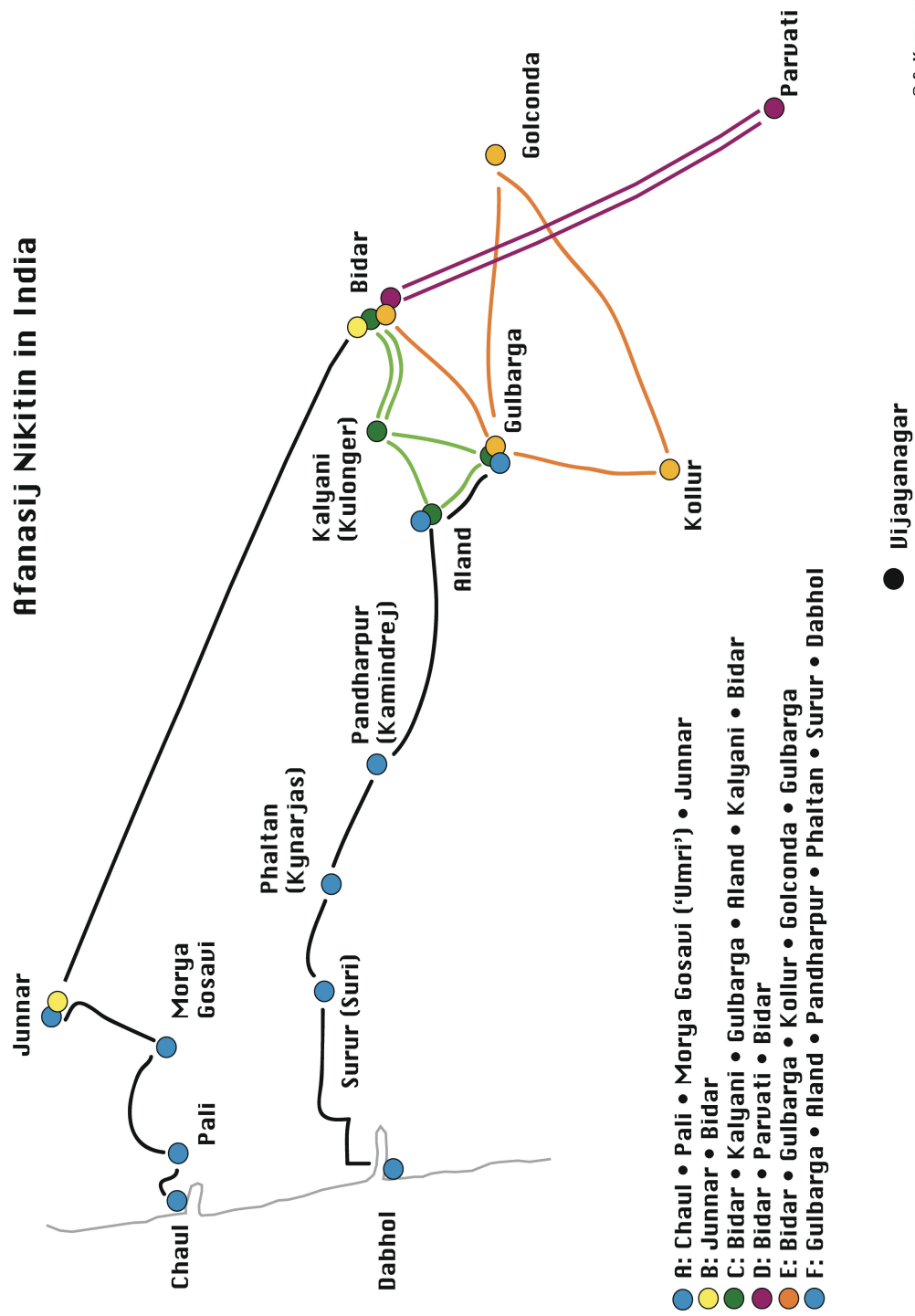
Section from Semenov's map (1980)



Revised version of Nikitin's return journey through India

7. 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).

Afanasiј Nikitin in India



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