EXPLORING THE REGISTAN DESERT

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M. Balsan was originally an engineer, and since 1935 he has made some fourteen expeditions to explore various remote regions. A member of the Académie des Sciences d'Outre-Mer, he is a former president of the Société des Explorateurs Français, and a former vice-president of the Société de Géographie and of the Société d'Ethnographie. He described his expedition among the Bashakardi in the Geographical Magazine of June 1969. Last year he explored the desert of Registan, the southernmost part of Afghanistan, and he has supplied the Journal with this condensed account of his journey.

I became interested in exploring the desert of Registan because the great British pioneers of the imperial epoch in India all said that they had only skirted it. Back in 1808 Captain Christie passed to the west of it on his journey to Herat and the River Helmand. In 1877 Col. Sir Charles MacGregor and Captain Lockwood took the same route. In 1878 and again in 1880 Major F. T. Humfrey and Major A. G. Yate kept to the valley of the Lora. Finally, that great tracer of frontiers Sir Henry McMahon passed to the south of Registan in 1896 and 1904.

The Afghan authorities themselves have always avoided this barren and supposedly uninhabited region; but they readily permitted me to tackle it in March and April 1971. Altogether I made four journeys round and across it, three by camel and one by car.

I tried first to strike down from the north, below Kandahar, but I could find no local volunteers for the kind of journey I had in mind. However, in 1937 I had noticed nomads farther eastward, near Spin Boldaq, an old fortified township close to the present frontier with Pakistan; so I made that my starting place. But I could recruit only three Achekzahi peasants, unused to riding, and three pack-camels, one of which I sometimes rode. It was a sorry mount, and because my men were so inexperienced I had to take the lead myself; yet we managed to cover in eight days the whole eastern edge of Registan, first through the desert, then along the valley of the Lora.

All this time I was seeking the true desert-dwellers of Registan. But the nomads I met - Djat, Badinzahi, Tereki - never penetrate deeply into the desert: they hurry past each year to get back as quickly as possible to their upland pastures, after wintering in the lowlands. Such men were not what I needed.

On the way I observed a large earth dam, or gabard band, 270 metres long and crowned by little signal towers built of clay. It is finely constructed and looks like Baluchi or Brahui work. This great dam, called Makandak, is about 500 years old, but its reservoir is now dried up.

Farther south, scattered along the Lora, are the ruins of several curious forts, once the strongholds of Durrani farmers.
A Brahui chieftain in Duti encampment.
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clan of Ahmad Shah. They may well have been destroyed around 1750, when the Baluchis led by Nasir Khan Brahui attacked Ahmad Shah before making a pact with him.

II

It was only in the extreme south, near Allaqadari, that I met the real masters of the Registan desert – the Mengal-Zaggar tribe of Brahui led by Sardar Goran, his only son Sardar Abd el Samad, his brother Sardar Qadrebach, and the latter’s sons Mostofar and Janou. The essential difference between them and their Brahui brothers in Baluchistan is that they do not live in houses of rammed earth, nor in tents (except for the chieftains) but in shelters built of brushwood. They range over the whole of southern Registan, a region of great sand-dunes reaching a height of eighty metres. Here the sand is rich in seeds carried by the westerly and southerly winds, and it seems to form a reservoir of moisture. Shrubs abound: *chomalreyy* (*haloxylon lovammodendron*) which provides the material for shelters, saddles, pack-saddles, and firewood; clumps of thorny *barek*; and *oudish*, which serves as fodder. Then there are hyacinths of the broom-rape family, wild leeks, and after the light winter rains, some thin grass.

The Brahui are thus able to graze vast flocks of goats and sheep, and some cattle. They employ the slow pack-camel known as *chotore*, the faster riding-camel or dromedary (*chotorebadi, jambass, mahara*), and also donkeys. Wells (*chah*) are far apart – there are only a dozen in sixty thousand square kilometres; skilfully bored to depths of as much as sixty metres, they provide water for the base-camps pitched close by, and for their surrounding livestock.

There are usually two women to each hearth, and they are kept in even more jealous seclusion than their sisters in Baluchistan. I was able to steal snapshots of them only with a telephoto lens. They wear long jackets and baggy trousers, and veil their faces whenever they approach men. Their adornments include a small gold flower on the right nostril, and pendants of silver, cornelian and turquoise on the forehead. All the women are weighed down with the incessant labour of fetching water from the well, baking bread, and milking; yet they also weave fine rugs (*kilim*) with a woollen weft on a cotton warp.

Each year caravans set out for Nushki or Darweshan to sell the surplus animals and take back tea, sugar, rice, flour, and cotton goods, for no crops can be raised in the desert.

Among the high dunes of the Brahui there are no trails; strong winds quickly obliterate every trace. The trails shown across the blank spaces of English maps are based on word-of-mouth accounts collected along the desert margins, and they represent traditional routes which are invisible on the ground. In that snake-infested desolation of sand, men travel point-to-point by the shortest route.

Luckily I already knew the Brahuis of Baluchistan, and could make myself understood in Baluchi; otherwise I should never have been able to get through to the dour Brahuis of Registan. Certainly I should not have obtained their help or a guide for my main camel-journey, slanting
northwestwards across the desert to Darweshan; and even so they allowed me only one guide and a single riding-camel. Because of the lack of water I had to travel fast; in fact we covered over 280 kilometres in five exhausting days. There are no more than two wells along this entire route, and we found only the one at Duti, where Sardar Janou Khan had his large remote encampment among the sands. Since we missed the second chah, at Karmanak, our waterskins undoubtedly saved our lives.

Approaching Koh-i-Malik I found an important deposit of gypsum.

III

The nomads of Darveshan and along the Helmand River are a Baluchi tribe, the Sendjehrani. Only one of them would accept the risk of joining me. With this companion, and again with a single dromedary, I crossed the whole northern part of Registan in four days (150 km.). This region consists of dasht — flat plain, firm underfoot. Nobody lives there, but Baluchi shepherds frequent it, and there are many gazelles. There had been no rain, and again we depended on our waterskins.

The most interesting sight on this journey was the Qala Haouz, or Castle of the Lake. This fortress, now ruined, once guarded an ancient dam with its lake and cultivated land. Judging from the architecture it must have been a dependency of Qala Bost, the winter dwelling of the Ghaznavid princes of the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

In the far north of Registan the desert rises abruptly before dropping to the valley of the Dori. Here again one finds dunes worthy of the Brahui: they form when sandstorms blowing from Seistan are checked by the mountains to the north, and forced to drop their burden.

IV

Southwestern Registan, where it borders on Seistan, has been described by several of the British travellers I have mentioned. Most of it is flat dasht, quite unlike the switchback dunes of the Mengal Brahuis, so I was able to explore it with two specially-equipped cars, a jeep and a pick-up truck. Here, as in the north, there are great numbers of gazelles.

Where the desert rises to the foothills of the Chagai range (Koh-i-Arbour, Koh-i-Sordaq, Koh-i-Galicha, Koh-i-Robat) there are beautiful outcrops of aragonite — translucent, crystalline, and veined with white, yellow and green. From time to time the Afghans extract it, for sale as paperweights or other decorative purposes.

This region is the fief of the Mohammadhassani Brahuis, who fought a fierce skirmish in 1845 against the Ferrier expedition. Nowadays they live peaceably, acknowledging as their chieftain Sardar Jomma Khan, who lives at Chah Ismail, where the tomb of the revered Ismail is an important place of pilgrimage. My guide was the son of another chieftain, Hadji Mardam Khan. He and I both lamented our lack of camels on the many occasions when the cars got stuck!

In spite of the Makandak Dam, the Durrani strongholds of the Lora valley, Qala Haouz, and the glittering outcrops of aragonite in the southwest, I remember and cherish most of all the fascinating world of the great dunes, where each day and each journey is a struggle for life.