

---

MICHAEL BINNIE

## The Yak King of Lashkergaaz

In the far north-east of Chitral, in a remote country of grasslands below the Borogil Pass, and a stone's throw from the Wakhan Corridor of Afghanistan, lived, or so people said, the richest man in all Chitral. He was Mirza Rafi, yak herder, sheep grazier, horse dealer, power-broker, drug smuggler and clan chief.

It was late June 1995. My wife Carol and I had been living for two and a half years in the village of Garam Chashma, in the west of Chitral District, where we had established a school via the agency of Voluntary Services Overseas. Carol had already returned home and in two months I was to hand over Pamir Public School to two incoming VSOs. One last adventure beckoned. I declared the three week summer holiday, packed a rucksack and set off to meet the legendary Yak King of Lashkergaaz.

My trek began after a morning's jeep ride from Chitral Town. I walked along a gravel flood plain, through avenues of poplar trees and beneath the ice peaks of the Hindu Raj. Always there was the rumble of the nearby Yarkhun river and, occasionally, I heard the evocative four note fluting of the golden oreole. In four hours I reached the village of Paur where I stayed with an extended family of 27 adults and children. Young men and boys took it in turn to sit with me in the guest room as we waited for the evening meal. Politely they asked me the standard questions: Did I have a wife and family? Was I a Moslem? Did I say daily prayers? At bedtime they helped me undress, carefully tucked me into bed and left a lamp burning beside me on the floor.

'You can turn that off,' I said.

'No', they said, 'it is better. In case you are afraid.'

Next day the valley narrowed to a series of gorges between which were little fields of cultivated land. As soon as I was seen, men and boys, even women rushed down to the path to shake my hand and then kiss the backs of their own in return. They were Ismaelis whose spiritual leader is the Aga Khan. 'Where was I going?' they asked. 'Borogil.' 'Why?' 'To meet Mirza Rafi.' 'Ah!' they said, 'Mirza Rafi.'

Occasionally I met Afghans, on their way home across the Borogil Pass, carrying enormous loads. I caught up with one man sitting on the grass nursing the stump of his truncated leg. His artificial foot and boot lay beside him.

'What happened?' I asked.

'Rooskies,' he said and made exploding sorts of noises and gestures.

'A mine?'

'Yes, a mine.'

On the third day I passed through the hamlet of Lasht where the cliffs fell back and I walked in bright sunlight through a grassy plain with horses grazing. I was reminded of Oxford's Port Meadow. Dotted about were little woods and lanes lined with wild roses dividing fields of ripening wheat. Herd boys were galloping about playing bare-back polo and young girls squatted in groups combing each other's hair. Skylarks were rocketing into the air claiming their spaces and in the background rolled the rhythmic drum-beat of the river.

Halfway across Port Meadow I fell in with a young man on a horse. His mount was no more than a pony, very dainty and neat, the colour of lightly done toast. It minced along beside me on delicate hooves, reminding me of a rocking horse. After a while the man asked me if I was a doctor.

'I'm afraid not,' I said.

'But perhaps you've got some medicines? You see, I get these pains in my back.'

I fished around in my sack and gave him four Paracetamols. He put them into a pocket and was about to ride off when he said, 'Look, I'm not going far but I'll take your bag for you.' He strapped my rucksack onto his saddle and for half an hour I walked blissfully unencumbered as he trotted along beside me. Eventually he stopped and gave me my sack before cantering off into a wood, twisting and turning through the trees like a cossack in a scene from Doctor Zhivago.

I was tired and hungry and lay down beside a stream. I fell asleep. I woke to find three small boys with catapults crouched on the grass a few feet away, staring into my face.

'Where are you going?' they asked, predictably.

'Borogil,' I said.

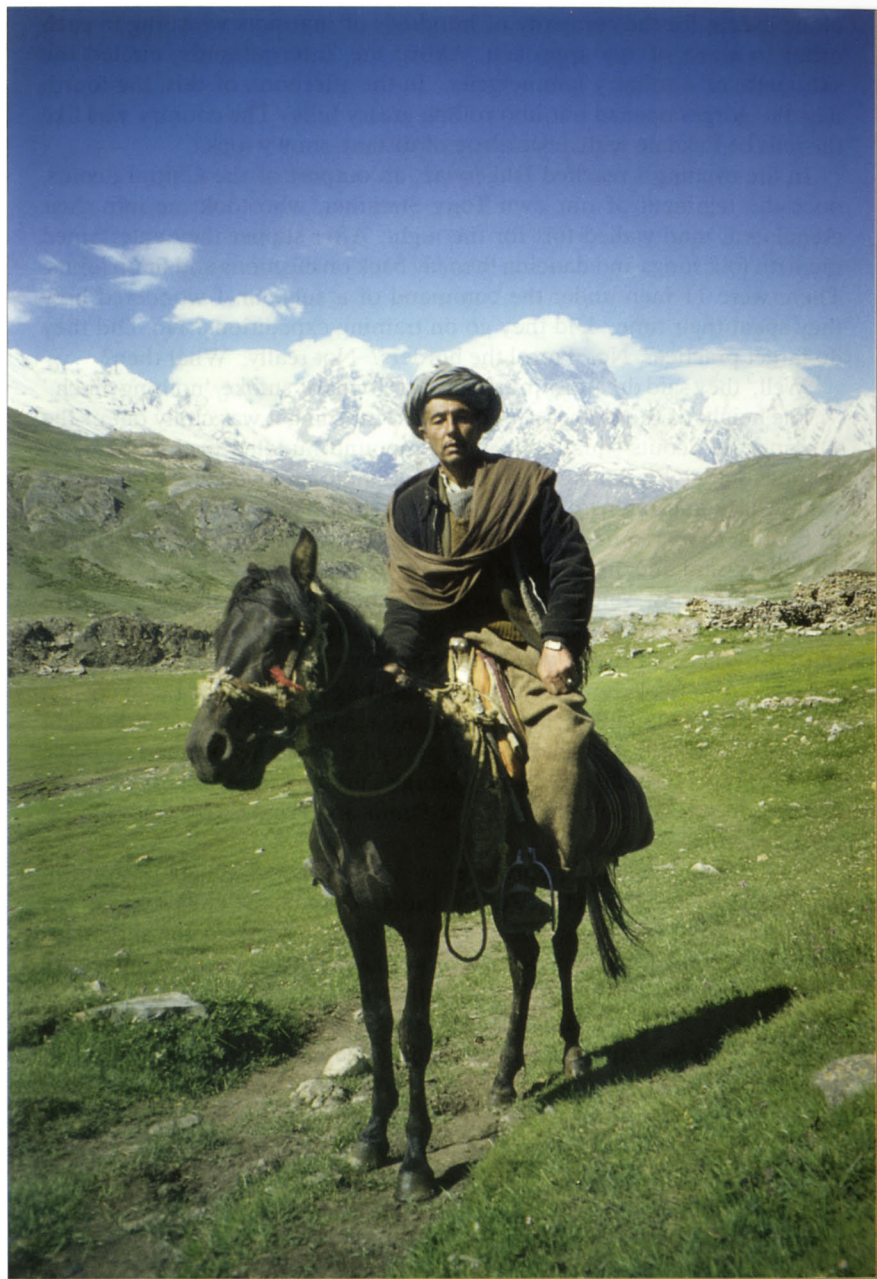
'Why?'

'To see Mirza Rafi.'

'Ah,' they said like everyone along the way, 'Mirza Rafi.'

Port Meadow narrowed to yet another gorge and my path wound its way up a steep, loose cliff. A rope length below me the river slid by like wet cement. A fall here was unthinkable. Twenty minutes later the gorge opened out into the narrowest of valleys where I sank down onto a patch of grass. Beside me stood a grove of poplars and behind was a field of ripened wheat, no bigger than a tennis court, completely taken over by cornflowers. Across the river a vast, inverted cone of scree, looking as smooth as brown sugar spilling from a bag, ended only at the water's edge. Little fishes darted about the stream beside which I was lying in the last hour of sunlight. I switched on my radio. It was the first Saturday of Wimbledon and Agassi was knocking hell out of someone.

Early next morning I surprised some playing children who ran away from me screaming in terror. It was definitely getting wild. 'Tea?' asked a man who emerged from a hut and, as I sat drinking it in the sunlight, his children crept back to examine me, like wary kittens. I walked all day quite



106. An Afgan horseman who carried Binnie's pack for a while after receiving a gift of Paracetamol. (*Michael Binnie*)

alone except for the company of hundreds of marmots whistling to each other to warn of my approach. Above me, intermittently, circled the silhouette of a solitary lammergeier. In the afternoon of this, the fourth day, the gorges opened out into rolling grassy hills. The country was like the fells of Eskdale with a backdrop of distant, snowy tops.

In the evening I reached Ishkerwaz, an outpost of the Chitral Scouts, once the regiment of our own Tony Streather, who took me into their crenulated, mud-walled fort for the night. After supper they entertained me with folk songs and dancing then lay back on cushions and lit up joints. There were 11 men under the command of a subadar. I wondered how they spent their time. Did they go on training expeditions? No. Did they do target practice? No. Patrol the borders? Not really. What then?

'Well,' they said dreamily from beneath clouds of smoke, 'nothing much.'

The height of the fort was 3000m. Next morning it was chilly out of the sun and the Scouts squatted in the compound huddled in their blankets waiting for their breakfasts. They looked like vultures. I wondered about their winter days and nights doing nothing much. Today I would reach Mirza Rafi's. There was some debate as to how long it would take me to get there.

'A day,' said one of the Scouts.

'No, half a day,' said another who was supported by a third.

The first man thought better of his advice. 'Yes, half a day.' Then he said (the ghost of Eric Newby, you have to believe me!), 'It's only *a short walk*.'

I walked for two hours through the undulating grasslands of Lashkergaaz, the territory of Mirza Rafi, before reaching a junction of two paths. Straight on was Mirza Rafi. To the left lay the Borogil Pass, an historic and strategic vantage point crossed by the young George Curzon, future Viceroy of India, in 1894 during an exploration of the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountains. Of it he wrote:

'...realizing its great importance owing to its geographical position in the scheme of frontier defence of the Indian Empire, the Government was convinced of the necessity of closing this small chink in the mountain palisade, which at that time Russia showed a persistent desire to penetrate at whatever point she could find an entrance.'

She never did penetrate it, the Great Game soon petered out into a stalemate and the importance of the Borogil Pass was consigned to a back-burner of history. I examined my map. I could nip up to the pass and still reach Mirza Rafi's that day.

Forty minutes later I was standing on an inconspicuous col. Ahead the ground fell away to a huge, empty valley. Afghanistan. The Pamir mountains in Tajikistan filled the distant skyline. Far away the valley made a dog-leg beyond which, I knew, flowed the fabled Oxus river, scene of Matthew Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rustum' to which I had thrilled as a boy. I sat down and ate a few raisins. The Scouts were back at the fort rolling their spliffs. Nobody would know. With a frisson of devil-may-care I strode down the slope into the Wakhan Corridor.



107. Descending from the Borogil Pass into the Wakhan Corridor. In the distance are the Pamirs. (*Michael Binnie*)

The path was a zig-zag donkey track, easy enough for a column of Russian mountain troops to have rushed, and soon I reached the stony bed of the Ab-I-Warsing, a tributary of the Oxus, which here is called the Ab-I-Wakhan. The landscape was dry and bare. There were no irrigation channels or signs of agriculture. A few huts had long since been abandoned. I passed some grazing camels but there seemed to be nobody around to herd them. I was alone in an enormous, empty landscape.

Or so I thought. I had been walking for some time when in the distance I made out a man sitting on a boulder. I reached him and we shook hands. He was about my height, strongly built, with coarse, thick hands and I understood he was returning home to Afghanistan after working on one of the jeep roads in Chitral. It was taken as read we would go on together, he hoisted a heavy sack onto his back and off we went.

We walked for what seemed like hours along the gravel beds of the Ab-I-Warsing, frequently crossing and re-crossing the stream. Sometimes we were thigh deep in swamps. Swarms of fishes and tadpoles fled before us. On and on we plodded across this desert of gravel with the Oxus seemingly getting no nearer. I had no particular plan. I knew that by now I would never get back across the Borogil by nightfall. Eventually I heard the continuous muffled sound of a huge volume of running water and suddenly we were there and, dazed and exhausted, I flopped down beside the banks of the Oxus. A hot strong wind blew downstream.



108. Binnie's Afghan fellow traveller 'Wakhi' wades into the Oxus river, returning home. (*Michael Binnie*)

Wakhi began to make preparations to cross the river. The far bank seemed to be about a mile away. He now asked me if I would come with him to his home.

'Where is it?' I croaked.

He gestured towards a distant landscape across the river. It might have been two miles or 20. Supposing the river rose in the night? I would never get back. I was due to re-open the school in just over a week. I had made an illegal crossing of the border. No one knew where I was.

'I would love to, but...'

'Please,' he implored.

'Sorry, old chum. No can do.'

He then crouched down by the river side and started to pray. 'Al-lah, Al-lah, Al-lah,' he intoned, perhaps as many as 20 times, then stepped gingerly into the swirling water and, balancing with his stick, inched his way 40 yards across the channel to an island.

I watched him through my binoculars as he crossed islands, waded more channels, until he finally disappeared in a wobble of heat haze. I focused my binoculars on the far bank and made out tantalizing green meadows and herds of horses and yaks grazing. I thought – I should have gone.

After some time, perhaps half an hour, I collected myself together and walked slowly back towards the Borogil Pass in the late evening sun and found a patch of grass beyond the swamp where I slept. In the

morning I passed the camels again, their double humps hanging beside their ribs like empty, flaccid breasts, and crossed the Darwaza An (the Doorway Pass) back into Chitral. I had been in Afghanistan for 24 hours.

By late afternoon I reached a house. A man appeared. 'Mirza Rafi?' No, he was his brother. Mirza Rafi was a few hours away on some higher grazing grounds. It would be better if I spent the night with him, he said. He went back into the house and returned with a rug which he flicked onto the grass. A few minutes later he reappeared with a bowl of yoghurt and a hunk of bread. Soon an extremely dirty little girl came out of the house with a baby on her hip and sat down beside me, fastening her eyes unwaveringly onto my face. Twice I tried to give the baby a smile but each time its face contorted in terror so I gave up. A friendly, shaggy puppy squirmed guiltily onto the rug beside us. I was sitting in a shallow bowl of grassland almost at the point where the ranges of the Hindu Kush and Hindu Raj converge. Three cows, two horses and a bull yak were grazing nearby. I could hardly have been happier. I fell asleep.

Next morning I set off for Mirza Rafi's summer encampment on grass as crisp as a golf links. Streams were cutting through the grassland and the air was filled with the rhapsody of skylarks. About two hours later I crossed a shallow col and, momentarily unseen, looked down on a scene of intense colour and activity. Inside a stone corral a number of women, dressed in reds and yellows and wearing Gilgiti pill-box hats, were milking sheep and goats. Children were rushing about playing. Scattered about were a number of low, stone huts. Almost immediately somebody saw me, gave a shout, and the ensuing silence was like the crash of a slamming door. I walked down into the settlement.

A tall, sunburnt man with Mongol features approached from one of the huts. He was wearing a Russian army bush hat, faded jeans and a garment straight from the pages of *Country Life* – a Barbour jacket.

'Welcome,' he said in English.

He took me to another hut and spread a felt rug on the mud floor. A crowd of children stood gazing in at us. A bowl of curds and another of cream were passed inside.

'I was waiting for you to arrive,' said the man.

He was Mirza Rafi.

We ate together sharing a single spoon and conversed in Urdu. He also spoke, or said he spoke, Chitrali, Pushtu, Farsi, Turki, Uzbek and a dialect of Chinese. The men, women and children of the settlement were all members of one family of which he was the head. He had been born in a Western province of China from which he had escaped as a boy with his family at the onset of communism. He spoke slowly, leaving long pauses between sentences. His courtesy and magnetism were almost overwhelming.

After eating, Mirza Rafi took me on a tour of his establishment. Milking was over and the flocks, accompanied by wolf-hounds, were heading for

the pastures. Further up the valley were his yak herds. Ponies, donkeys, hens, pigeons and a solitary camel made up the livestock. My host was a man of few words to whom everyone in the camp genuflected at the start of the day, and to whom he extended the back of his right hand to be kissed. His sphere of influence, I was told, extended into the Wakhan Corridor and as far as the passes above Gilgit. I didn't doubt that the Chitral Scouts kept well out of his way. Well was he known as the Yak King of Lashkergaaz.

We sat down on a rock and he told me about his life. He owned 200 yaks and 700 sheep and goats. Every autumn the passes from Gilgit were crossed by buyers to whom he sold 40 yaks and a third of his flocks. I calculated that this amounted to around £20,000, a spectacular figure by local standards, yet his summer house was no more than a pile of stones and his winter residence only marginally more solid.

He was keen to know about my life. What was the language of England? Ah! English. And were yaks grazed in England? He took an enormous shine to my binoculars. Could I possibly sell them to him? These days he didn't actually have any cash but would I accept a yak? He had to be joking. No, he said, he would give me one of his best animals which I could drive to Chitral and there sell for a profit. I foresaw a number of difficulties to this arrangement. I extricated myself from the impasse only by explaining that the binoculars were a gift from my son. Ah, well, he said, in that case...

Again that night we shared a meal entirely of milk products and, a little after night fall, the entire company went to bed, I in my own little bothy. I left the next morning though he pressed me to extend.

'Next time, please, you bring your wife and children,' he said as he walked half a mile with me at my leave taking. His final words, like his first, were in English.

'Forget me not,' he said.

I turned and started out on my journey home.

**Summary:** A fortnight's solo journey on foot in the Hindu Kush, straying into Afghanistan, in summer 1995.