



## BĒṬANĪ

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**BĒṬANĪ** (*t* = retroflex *t*; singular Bēṭanay), a Pashtun tribe on the eastern edge of the Solaymān mountains, where it is particularly concentrated at the western end of the Gabarḡar (the Marwat range in Anglo-Iranian toponymy), a low, though very broken, mountain range that separates the Bannū basin from the piedmont of the Dērajāt (North-West Frontier Province, Pakistan).

The precise form of the tribal name is somewhat uncertain. In eastern sources it is sometimes written Baṭānī or Baṭanī, whereas in British sources it is habitually transcribed Bhittani or Bhittanni. Doubtless the latter spellings can be interpreted as reflecting contamination from India, for aspirated consonants are unknown in Pashto.

Several authors have incorrectly described the Bēṭanī as a branch of the Wazīr, who are their nearest neighbors on the west and with whom they maintain close though not always amicable relations (Nevill, p. 10). In fact, the Bēṭanī are said to be descended from Bēṭ (or Bēṭan, Baṭ, Baṭan), the third and last son of Qays ‘Abd-al-Rašīd, the mythical ancestor of all the Pashtun. Within the overall genealogical pattern of the Pashtun this is the sole instance of an ethnic name taken from a first-generation descendant of the common ancestor. This circumstance confers on the tribe a genealogical position all the more valued in that the eponymous ancestor is also recognized as having had great religious standing, which earned him the title shaikh. Indeed, the Bēṭanī constitute a category rather like that of the Pashtun marabout tribes, though they do not expressly claim this status.



Another very remarkable feature of the descendants of Shaikh Bēṭ, one that is also unique among Pashtun genealogies, is the predominance of the matrilineal line over the patrilineal line. The large Ġelzay (q.v.) and Lōdī (q.v.) tribal groups claim descent from Shaikh Bēṭ's daughter Bībī Matō, and they are of much greater importance than the Bēṭanī proper, who are descended from Shaikh Bēṭ's two sons, Kaḡīn (sometimes Kačīn; Ne'mat-Allāh, p. 127, n. 64) and Waṛsbūn (or Īsbūn or even Špūn "shepherd"; Ne'mat-Allāh, pp. 45, 127 n. 64), the latter perhaps an adopted son, according to one isolated tradition reported by Bruce, p. 1.

The internal subdivisions of the Bēṭanay tribe are not well ascertained. The sources that describe them are generally in disagreement (cf., for example, Hayāt Khan, pp. 157f.; Šēr-Moḡammad Khan, p. 205; Bruce, pp. 22ff.; and Ṣafar Kākākēl, p. 1331). They all, however, demonstrate the existence, side by side with entirely classical Arabic-Pashto names, of a group of ethnic names with Indian roots. This situation, which is not at all rare among the Pashtun tribes, is difficult to interpret. At the very least it suggests a long and complex ethnogenic process, including islamicization (symbolized by the title shaikh attributed to the eponymous ancestor), then pashtunization of an Indian or Indianized Solaymānī population, who perhaps belonged to a shamanistic tradition (the word *biṭán*, which means "shaman" in Burushaski, spread over a wide area, for it is found with the same meaning in Khowar, a Dardic language of Chitral; see M. I. Sloan, *Khowar-English Dictionary*, Peshawar, 1981, s.v. *betán*).

All available evidence points to a location of this ethnogenic process on the western side of the Solaymān mountains, in present Afghan territory. Shaikh Bēṭ is reported to have lived in the Altamūr range, between Lōgar and Zormat (Bellew, p. 12), and to have been buried at Ġaznī (Hayāt Khan, p. 156). His descendants in the male line, the Bēṭanī, are known to have inhabited the same area up to the ninth/fifteenth century, when their Ġelzī cousins expelled them (Ibbetson, p. 78). As no earlier geographical reference to this area occurs in their tradition, this would give a date for their arrival on the eastern side of the Solaymān mountains. There a split soon took place: While some lineages managed to get control of part of the Gabarḡar, where they have succeeded in maintaining their ethnic identity up to the present, others left for the Gangetic plains and apparently melted into other Pashtun groups.

The recent history of the Bēṭanī has been largely determined by the land that they now inhabit, adjacent to the plains of the middle Indus and the Wazīr



uplands, access to which they control through the four great transversal valleys of Larzan, Šūza, Šīnkay, and Šahūr. Soon after the incorporation of the Punjab into British India (1848) the British sought control over this territory, through which the Mas'ūd used to pass during their raids on the colonial districts. To obtain the formal submission of the Bēṭanī, who were too small in numbers to resist, did not take long: The simple threat, in 1853, of a military expedition was sufficient. To obtain their active cooperation in efforts to maintain order along the frontier required more time, however: It was only in 1874 that they agreed to such cooperation, which soon included formation of a Bēṭanay militia company and its incorporation into the South Waziristan Militia, known as the South Waziristan Scouts since 1921.

In fact, the Bēṭanī very quickly revealed themselves to be not only incapable of barring the way to the Mas'ūd but also ready, whenever the occasion permitted, either to take part in raids by the latter or to oppose the advance of the repressive British column, behavior for which they periodically sought pardon. This double political game, typical of the attitude of a minority group caught between two more powerful groups, caused the Indian Army to maintain, from August, 1892, until 1923, a permanent garrison at Janḍōla, the principal town of the Bēṭanay country, in a strong strategic position at the entrance to the Šīnkay and Šahūr valleys. During the entire colonial period the territory of the Bēṭanī thus played the role of buffer tract between the Tribal Area proper and the Settled Districts. This role was recognized administratively in its status as a Frontier Region, which it still maintains and which makes it an enclave of the Tribal Area placed under the direct authority of the district commissioner of Dēra Esmā'īl Khan.

The Bēṭanī have always been few in numbers: From 8-9,000 in about 1884 (*Gazetteer . . . Dera Ismail Khan*, p. 69) they are said to have increased to more than 43,000 by about 1960 (Spain, p. 53). Their traditional way of life combines small-scale irrigated agriculture in the valleys with pastoral migrations along the mountain slopes in summer and inverse seminomadism toward the Indus plains in winter. At the end of the nineteenth century their dwellings were mainly mud and brushwood hovels or simple caves, revealing that they were still far from permanently settled (*Gazetteer . . . Dera Ismail Khan*, p. 68). Owing to lack of water and arable land in their mountainous habitat signs of overpopulation appeared early. Throughout the nineteenth century an important portion of the excess population was absorbed by vigorous agricultural colonization of their lowland winter quarters, in the two *taḥsīl* of



Marwat and especially Tānk, as far as the Gōmal valley (*Gazetteer . . . Bannu*, p. 33; *Gazetteer . . . Dera Ismail Khan*, pp. 26, 28). Originally spontaneous, this movement received a decisive impetus in 1865, with the adoption of a systematic policy of granting lands to the Bēṭanī throughout the northern part of the Dērajāt, as a reward for the tribe's submission and services rendered during the first British military expedition against the Mas'ūd (April-May, 1860). By about 1880 the Bēṭanī thus possessed 14,720 acres in British territory (Paget and Mason, p. 504), and a third of them lived in the *taḥsīl* of Tānk (*Gazetteer . . . Dera Ismail Khan*, p. 69).

A tiny minority of Bēṭanī lives in Afghanistan, on the western edge of the Solaymān mountains. The circumstances of its separation from the main body of the tribe are completely unknown. Perhaps this was the former location of the tribe. In the early 1930s three villages in the Ġaznī area were reported to be inhabited by Bēṭanī, and in addition 100 nomadic Bēṭanī families migrated between eastern Afghanistan and the Dērajāt (Robinson, p. 158). The Afghan Nomad Survey of 1978 (unpublished) no longer found any trace of this migratory movement; on the other hand, it did count sixty-two families of seminomadic Bēṭanī harvesters wintering in Nangrahār and spending the summer in the immediate vicinity of Kabul.

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