

The Old Man of Goshta

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An encounter with the man who may be Afghanistan's oldest voter.

Badam's beard is not completely white, but he's a little hard of hearing. Still, it's difficult to believe that he is 109 years old. While many Afghans don't have a record of their birth, Badam may have been the oldest voter to take part in Afghanistan's recent presidential election.

On October 9, election day, he came out to the polling station accompanied by family members and his fellow villagers. Some young boys were dancing the Atan, a traditional Pashtun dance, while two Kuchi nomads played drums in celebration. Badam joined in the dance, but quickly became tired, and leaned against the nearest wall to watch.

Badam, a Pashtun nomad who has spent most of his life on the eastern edge of Goshta district, Nangarhar province, said he didn't know the exact date of his birth, but said his mother told him that he was born in the year of "zeym", or inundation.

Rohulamin, 55, a local teacher in Goshta, said "zeym" — a year when the land was inundated and all the crops were destroyed — was the equivalent to 1894.

And Badam is old enough to remember some of the crucial moments in Afghanistan's early twentieth-century history. During the reign of the modernising King Amanullah, he fought under Khan Haji against British forces.

"At that time I was a handsome boy and I had the strength to fight against British," he said.

Now, by voting, Badam said he felt as if he had struck another blow for Afghan independence.

"I know it's not appropriate for my age, but I danced the Atan today because it's one of the happiest days of my life," he said.

He said he could count such days on the fingers of one hand.

"The first was on my second wedding day, which was a love match, and the second was five years later, when I became father of a son," he said. "The third is today, when I decide my own destiny."

Badam's didn't like his first wife, but married her in keeping with his father's wishes. She died, however, without having children, paving the way for him to marry a second time.

Badam smiled at the memory of his second wife. Had he not been an only son, he would never have been able to marry a second time, because the dowry was so high.

"She was my cousin," he said. "My father agreed that I should marry her, and he gave 200 sheep to

Jamdad, my uncle."

Recalling their romance, he said, "I had always watched her secretly, so my father never knew. She did the same."

He said that he had no good memories of Afghanistan's former rulers, saying they were only on the throne to line their pockets and to wine and dine.

"With the exception of Amanullah Khan, all the past heads of state ruled solely to accumulate wealth for their families and relatives, but they did nothing for their people," he said.

This time around, Badam said, things may be different. He said he ordered all his sons, daughters, grandchildren, and sisters-in-law to obtain voting cards and to cast votes for their favorite candidate.

Badam made his own choice.

"I gave my vote to [interim president Hamed] Karzai," he said. "My sons said that he is a good man."

He said he was optimistic about the current situation. And he was encouraged by the creation of Afghanistan's new national army.

"When I go to city and see the strong young lads in camouflage uniforms and green berets, I'm happy because they are the guardians of our country"

His secret for longevity? Pure food and hard physical labour.

Badam said he doesn't eat vegetable oil - "it doesn't have the power of animal oil" - and worked hard all his life. Young men today, he said, don't know the meaning of hard work.

"To make flour, I used to carry 140 kilograms of grain on my back to Malik [village elder] Akbar Khan Mechni's house, which was very far away from us, and it took me all morning to get there," he said.

As the father of six sons and three daughters, he didn't know exactly how many grandchildren and great-grandchildren he has. But his oldest son, Imamuddin, said that, all told, Badam had 25 grandsons, 22 granddaughters, and 28 great-grandchildren.

At the end of the interview, he recounted an amusing story about one of his grandchildren on election day.

"My oldest daughter joked with me on election day that she lost our voter registration cards, which had been wrapped up in a piece of cloth inside our tent," he said. "Quick as a shot, I jumped up and threw my sandal at her.

"It was a good thing that Mohammad Alam [Badam's son] explained that she was only joking," he added.

"Otherwise, I could have nearly killed that girl."

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