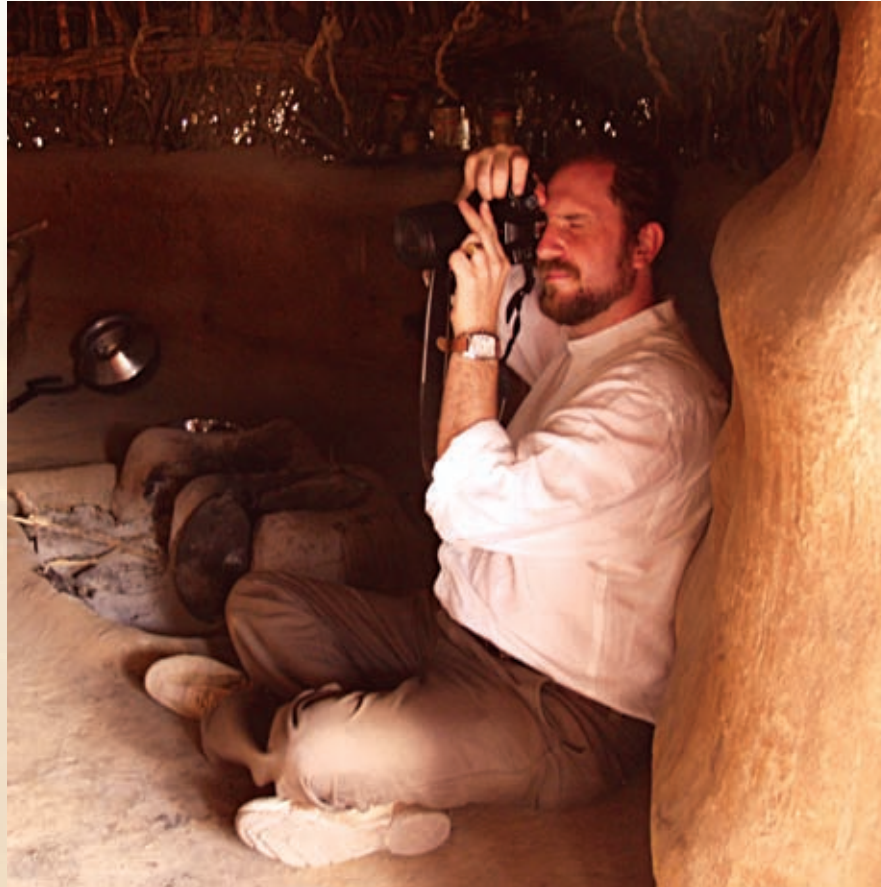


In Search of Water









Picture courtesy: K. Harish

Nicolo' Tassoni Estense, born in 1970, is an Italian diplomat and a photographer, the first by profession, the second by passion. Earlier posted in Libya and France, it was during his third assignment in India that his flair for the camera truly blossomed. Married, and a happy father of two daughters, he tries to combine working engagements and family life with his love for photography. This book is his personal homage to India, even as he prepares to leave for his new post in Egypt.

In Search of Water

Nicolo Tassoni Estense





Picture courtesy: JBF

Foreword

I am delighted to share with you this exquisite compilation of photographs depicting the story of the communities living in the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation project area. “In Search of Water” by Nicolo Tassoni unveils the hopes, the dreams, the aspirations of these people; their yearnings to share their lives with the outside world, and their success in search of water.

Anyone who is familiar with Rajasthan will also know the challenges, the struggle and the courage of these simple yet beautiful people. For thousands of years, Marwar has managed the availability of water; treasuring seasonal raindrops into their talab or nadi (ponds), beri (seepage wells), tanka (underground tanks) and other water harvesting structures. Then came an era of municipal water provisions when all of it was somewhere lost and people started looking for outside help to obtain water for their everyday needs. This led to a false sense of plenty encouraging people to shed away traditional water harvesting culture. I watched women walk long distances every day to collect water for their families, men gazing at the blue sky and lamenting over the loss of crops, year after year of drought; somewhere the prophecy by the hermit Cheeria Nath ji, “Perennial drought for Marwar!” haunted me and I knew in my heart that we had to bring back the good old days to Marwar when year-round water availability was a reality. And, we did. We established the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation to revive the strength of traditional wisdom which has gradually translated into innumerable rainwater harvesting structures in villages and dhanis (hamlets), schools and community centers throughout Marwar. The people of Marwar are now taking ownership of their future. They are bringing joy back into their lives!

I am grateful to Nicolo Tassoni Estence, who during his diplomatic mission to India at the Embassy of Italy in New Delhi, has taken time and effort to explore the Foundation’s work with the people of Marwar, through his soulful artistic endeavors and produced a rich foray of images that are eternal portraits of serendipity found in a rain drop.

This coffee table book by Nicolo Tassoni is an inviting, almost tantalizing, glimpse into the mysterious land of Marwar; into lives that are painted with the minutest details highlighting their biggest assets: self worth, faith and pride. On one hand, he captures the innocence and the rustic charm abundantly displayed in these desert people, on the other, he very aptly succeeds in penetrating into their sense of insecurity that the scarcity of water has pressed upon their faces. As you will discover, each picture is a story. From shepherds grazing cattle to paniharans (women holding pitchers) fetching water - Nicolo shows all phases of their lives. Eventually, the book thrives in painting an undulating canvas of feelings of the beneficiary communities- celebration, melancholy, patience, acceptance, love, hope, excitement and depression - brought all together.

In presenting you this artful collection, I also commend the efforts of my team at Jal Bhagirathi Foundation. Bringing communities together, awakening the strength that lies within them and transforming hopes into reality for thousands of people scattered across umpteen villages, the organization is almost a trailblazer in the region. Armed with an unbeatable passion for “availability of water for all”, the professionals and volunteers work tirelessly to renew the culture of traditional rainwater harvesting. It is indeed a blissful moment for me to see village ponds brimming with water, girls walking to the village school in the morning and men sitting under the shade of green trees. To see their smiling faces is sheer ecstasy.

At this point, I must also confess that this success would not have been possible had it not been for the unstinted support from the UNDP & Italian Development Corporation. I take this opportunity to thank them for their support in every step of this progress. Their trust in our approach, their support to these villages, their commitment to bring a change – have all helped pave the way towards success.

HH Maharaja Gaj Singh II



Introduction

As soon as our convoy left the main road for the tiny sand track heading west towards Jaisalmer, the sparse trees and small hamlets dotting the landscape suddenly vanished in a cloud of yellow dust, raised by the car ahead. Then, the cars behind followed suit, each in turn enveloped in the dust of the one ahead, until it looked as if the whole convoy had been swallowed by the jaws of a golden, mist-like giant.

Emerging from this disconcerting sensation that limited my field of vision to the car's interior, all of a sudden I caught sight of a camel's head and of what looked like the shape of a small cart heading in the opposite direction. The colored turban of the cart's driver lingered in my eyes for a while, soon to be replaced by the image of women in bright saris walking along the path, then by the shadow of a wall and an open door. It took me while to realize that we were in the middle of a village.

It was at that precise moment that I remembered a phrase I had read somewhere: "Marwar, the most densely populated desert in the world". There we were.

I heard the beating of drums and as the sand slowly dissipated, I could see hundreds of men, women and children gathered together in front of us, in a vivid canvas of incredible colors. We were on a Jal Bhagirathi Foundation's field visit. The Maharaja of Jodhpur was with us and the whole village had gathered to greet us with an overwhelming parade of chants, dances and rituals.

I had visited Jodhpur the year before with my family. It was a four days tourist vacation and we were then as naïve and hurried as all tourists are. I had of course been impressed by the blue city and the immense Mehrangarh Fort towering above it. But I had no time to even speculate on what the life of this ancient and glorious people could be just outside the attractions of its capital.

Months later I began to be involved with the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation project for improving water access in two hundred villages of Marwar. I soon discovered the determination and relentless work of the Jal Bhagirathi in providing water to the many communities scattered in the Thar desert.

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Slowly I became familiar with names such as talabs (Ponds), Beris (wells) and tankas (water storage structures) and with the concept of "water harvesting". But it was only when I visited the villages that I really understood what it means to live in the world's most densely populated desert. The life of entire villages depends upon sparse rain showers during the monsoon season and

on the capacity to “harvest” this precious resource and preserve it for the dry months ahead. It was September, just after some good rains, and the water ponds were filled with water. The women were walking home carrying back to the village a multitude of traditional vessels filled to the brim, gracefully balanced on their heads. The other side of the pond was for the buffaloes who drank slowly in peaceful contentment, their horns gleaming in the sun. Quite a bucolic scene I could not resist to capture in my lens. But as I clicked away, I could not but reflect on the sad picture one would witness in April or May, after the water was gone from the ponds, evaporating in temperatures as high as 45 or 50 degrees Celsius. Still, women would walk miles, below the scorching sun and over the hot dust, to try and catch a few muddy drops. The cattle will have nothing to depend on for their survival but patches of wet mud.

With just one crop growing in the monsoon and no water to spare for irrigation, animals are the main source of wealth for the villagers. In the dry season men are often forced to move out with the cattle towards more fertile plains, in search of nourishment hundreds of kilometers away. Or else they would head for the city in search of work as day-labourers. Women would stay back at the village to look after the elder and the young, who would soon learn what it is like to face the harsh conditions of their habitat.

The survival of these communities depends on their traditional knowledge, on skills acquired in thousand of years. And most of all it must rely on the community’s solidarity, in a difficult balancing act between rigid caste rules and the need to cooperate for survival.

The village water pond is the best example. The life of the whole community depends upon it and so, despite the complex social rules governing village life, all the inhabitants must join hands in the maintenance of this invaluable resource. Religious and caste divides and the centrifugal forces of the modern world, with its lure of politics and individual entrepreneurship, have somehow hampered the natural capacity of the villages to handle their common resources.

This is one of the most interesting facets of Jal Bhagirathi’s work, as they help the villagers to create representative bodies in charge of water management, called Jal Sabhas, or Water Councils. The Jal Sabha is the real driving force behind the revival of the traditional water harvesting structures. The village representatives seating in the Jal Sabha elaborate their plan for improving community access to water. They often take up ambitious projects to restore the original capacity of the water ponds, as the lack of maintenance have often resulted in deep silting that drastically diminishes the pond’s harvesting

capacity, thus providing water for just few months and compelling the villagers to buy expensive water tanks from other villages, or from the city. The Jal Sabhas may also deliberate on the construction of beris, tankas or rooftop water storage structures. Jal Bhagirathi lends technical and financial support to their endeavors but at least 30% of the community project must be funded by the village itself. The scheme contributes therefore to ensure self-ownership of the project by the village people.

Attention is also given to empowering the most vulnerable sectors of society. Women and scheduled castes and tribes are ensured an increasing role in the Jal Sabha and in the management of the village water. Water becomes therefore a tool for self-empowerment, though the traditional feudal context of Rajasthan still relegates women to an exceedingly marginal role in the decision making processes, while at the same time it loads them with the heaviest duties, –among which water collection is prominent.

* * *

I am by no means a professional photographer and photography has been quite a recent passion. But my first digital camera some years ago opened a sort of “inner eye”. From that moment I started to see things around me differently. The world was brighter. Needless to say, my passion for photography further blossomed in India. The three years spent in this wonderful country, apart from the extraordinary professional and human experience, have been a hymn to beauty. The beauty of nature and the beauty of arts, but above all, the inner beauty of people.

In this sense, the photos collected in this book are a humble act of love for the people of Marwar who deeply touched me with the warmth of their hearts and the dignity of their bearing. Their ancient wisdom resonated somehow with the depth of my soul. I hope my images will also stir something in you and help you to imagine or remember a human brotherhood that lives so far away from our modern cities, in a world where the rain showers and the circle of seasons enshrine and encompass human existence.

Nicolo’ Tassoni Estense

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I cannot but start by thanking Jal Bhagirathi Foundation for a commitment that commands respect and admiration. To His Highness the Maharaja of Jodhpur Gaj Singh II and to Her Highness Maharani Hemlata Rajye goes my sincere respect for having given to the project their support, but also my gratitude for their hospitality and protection. My friends Prithvi Raj Singh and Kanuprya Harish, the driving forces behind the successes of JBF, have my unconditional admiration and gratitude. They also shall bear with me for the additional effort demanded for the release of this book. I am also most grateful to the patient and energetic Reeta Gupta, this book is the product of her design skills. I shall pay tribute to the numerous officials and activists of the Foundation, working both at the Jal Ashram and on the field, from Sanjay Bansal, to Matthew, from Rajender Singh Bhatti, to Milad..

I am also much indebted to Raja Gopal Singh of Bhadrajun, for he welcomed me not only in his ancestral residence but in the realm of his family memories, helping me to understand the Rathores' rich traditions and values.

I must mention the incredible encouragement given me by my two colleagues Reena Albert and Antonella Simonelli, at many times during my Indian experience my eyes openers on this country. It is thanks to Reena and Antonella if it has been so natural and finally inevitable to fall in love with this Country.

Finally I have to thank my wife Germana and my daughters Isotta and Sibilla. They were patient enough to bear my physical and mental absence and love me enough for understanding the importance I have attached in completing this book.



Picture Courtesy: JBF





A brief historical sketch of Marwar

Marwar, the “Land of Death” that stretches for miles into the plains of the Thar desert, has been one of the most glorious Rajput kingdoms of Rajasthan. The Rathore rulers of Marwar settled in the arid plains of Western Rajasthan after losing their kingdom of Canouji, in Uttar Pradesh. Tracing their mythological ascendance to the “Solar Race”, the Rathore propagated rapidly in the new territories. In 1453 Rao Joda, the head of the clan, founded a new capital in Jodhpur from where the Rathores kept consolidating their power and strength. A large clan of over 50,000, bound by strong ties of brotherhood and kinship, they soon became famous for their courage in battle. A number of the family cadets later founded independent kingdoms in Rajasthan, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh.

The vast kingdom of Marwar extended in the 16th century from Mount Abu all the way to the outskirts of Delhi, or more precisely ninety kilometers from the city walls. A collision with the Mughal empire was inevitable and Rao Maldeo fought a decade-long war against the Mughal’s general Sher Shah. Maldeo’s son Chandrasen had to concede Jodhpur to Emperor Akbar in 1563. A century later, his successor Jaswant Singh, along with the Rathore chieftains, fought a memorable battle against Emperor Aurangzeb, recalled in Rajasthan’s Annals of Colonel Tod “Ten thousand Muslims fell in the onset, which cost seventeen hundred Rathores, besides Guhilotes, Haras, Gaurs, and some of every clan of Rajwarra. Aurangzeb and Murad only escaped because their days were not yet numbered. Notwithstanding the immense superiority of the imperial princes, aided by numerous artillery served by Frenchmen, night alone put a stop to the contest of science, numbers, and artillery, against Rajput courage.” After Jaswant’s death, Aurangzeb took possession of Jodhpur where he posted a muslim governor. But one of the Jaswant’s wives gave birth to a son, Ajit, whom the Emperor kept under his control in his Delhi harem. However, the brave Rathore chieftain Durgadas secured the escape of the infant Ajiit, who grew up in anonymity in a small village close to Mount Abu. For 20 years Durgadas fought the Mughals in Marwar and when the boy finally came of age, all the Rathore Chieftains rallied with him and –after defeating the enemy- restored him to the throne of Jodhpur. The feats of the infant king brought up in anonymity and of the gallant Durgadas form the epic of the Rathores. Their deeds are still sung in every public occasion by the bards of Marwar, a predominantly Muslim community of singers which continues to chant the glories of the Rathores.

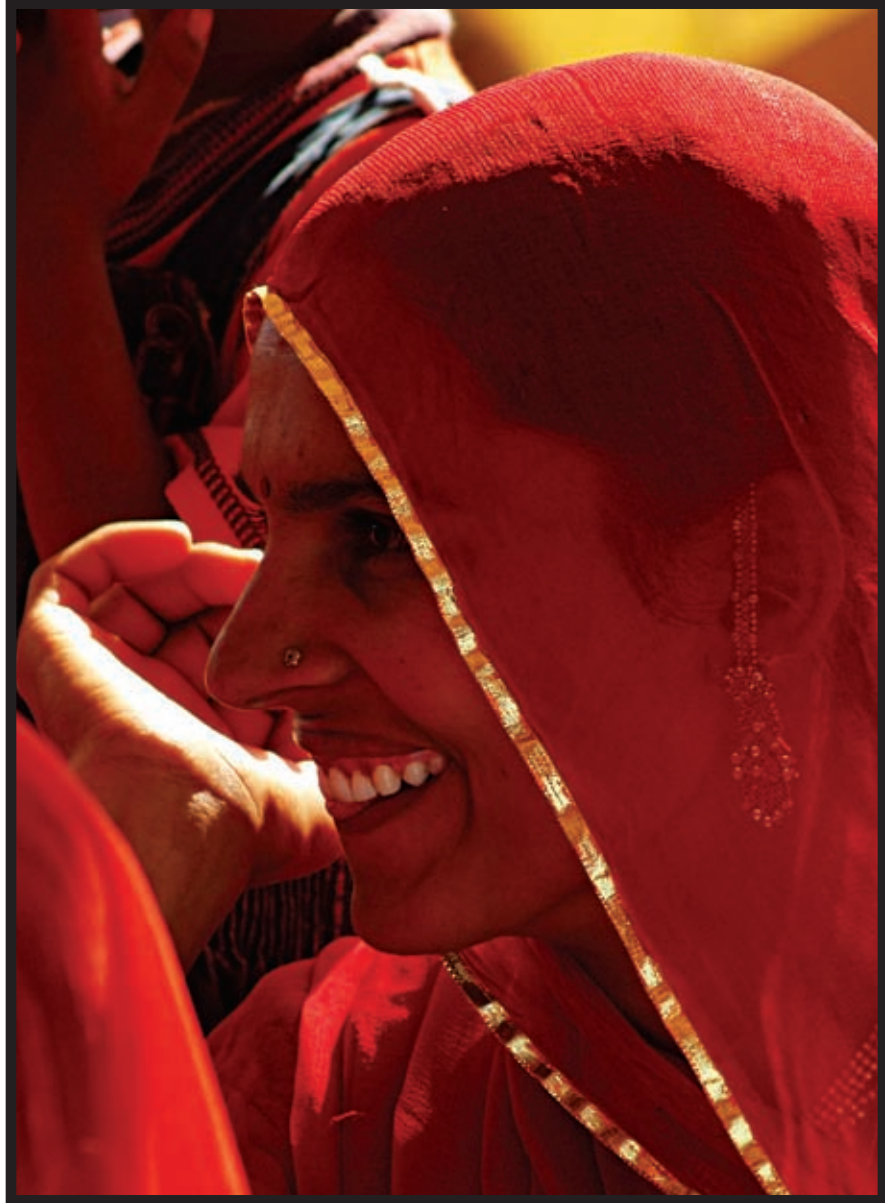
The glorious history of the Rathores is responsible for the strong feudal imprinting of Marwar that continues to this day. The sons of Joda, as the Rathores called themselves, formed a vast clan of vassals of the same royal blood, their dialectic relations being well represented by the following statement: "When our services are acceptable, then is he our lord, when not, we are again his brothers and kin, claimants, and laying claim to the land".

This feudal brotherhood between the Maharaja of Jodhpur and his vassals Rajas and Thakurs (feudal lords), is still alive, despite the formal abrogation of all past privileges, and the identity of the Marwar's villages of today is still strongly influenced by this feudal cosmogony.

At the time of India's independence, Maharaja Hanwant Singh was ruling the State of Marwar. Of progressive and democratic ideas, he ensured that the transition from the British Raj to independent India in Marwar happened without trauma. After his premature death in 1952 his four-years old son Gaj Singh was enthroned as the Maharaja of Jodhpur. He is the founder and Chairman of the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation.









Talab of Dharamsar Village

An otherwise big talab is almost dry due to bad rains. One good monsoon shower would suffice to replenish the entire pond

Facing page: *Village women preparing cottage butter*





Picture Courtesy: JBF









*Hamlet of Katnada Ki Dhani, Judia,
Jodhpur district*

A community of pot-makers (Prajapat), settled here and converted into cattle breeders. Closeby to their mud huts, with the support of JBF, they have built a beri (well) that intercepts a perennial source of water.



Picture Courtesy: JBF





Every day is a life balancing act Women of Marwar

A Group of women, clothed in bright saris gather in front of a talab. They carry with them big metal pots and buckets, as well as clay jars they fill with the water of the pond. A woman in a sari of delicate white and yellow colors, her face veiled, lays a first silver shining metal pot on her head. Another woman passes her a second pot. She cautiously and delicately lays it on the top of the first one. With slow gentle movements she adjust the two metal jars on her head and starts walking back to the distant village with a regal gait, a slow graceful dance learned in thousand of years. For a woman in Marwar, every day must be a life balancing act. Yet every single movement, every action is filled with grace.

According to a survey conducted by the Jal Bhagirathi Foundation, the day of a woman in Rajasthan is composed of an impressive number of heavy tasks and almost every minute is allotted to some activity for the household, in great disproportion with the comparatively limited time men devote to labour.

Collecting water takes many hours a day. Women come morning and afternoon, sometimes even three or four times, to fill their buckets and jars again and again. When not on their way to or from the talab, they collect food for the family and the animals, milk the cows and goats, ensure that the walls and the floor of their mud huts are constantly repaired, by hand-smearing new layers of mud that are left to dry in the sun.

Cooking is also an essential dimension of a woman's life, starting from the early hours of the morning. The mud hut, generally devoted to the kitchen, is her realm. A dark tiny space, few utensils, a brazier on the floor. As soon as she lights the small wooden fire to start cooking rotis or preparing tea, the hut is immediately filled with a dense smoke. It is hard to breathe, the eyes lacrimate, and yet -under her veil- she continues unhurriedly to perform the same, almost ritual, gestures.

Despite the extremely uncomfortable situation, the dark kitchen hut looks to me as a sacred space, to be accessed with the respect due to a very private world that can barely tolerate the presence of a stranger. I am fascinated by the mysterious gestures the veiled creature sitting in front of me is performing. No word or sign is exchanged, yet it seems as if my presence itself carries an almost intolerable intimacy, as if I was breaching an invisible boundary.





Celebrating Water
Women return to their village from
a welcome ritual.













Endangered Rabaris

The challenges of nomadic life

The inhabitants of the Thar desert face the challenges of an extreme climate and of an endemic scarcity of resources. The villagers have however been able to develop networks of solidarity and mutual support, through the joint management of the precious water resources.

Villagers are however not the only residents of the Thar desert, also home, since unmemorable time, to important nomadic communities. Prominent among them, for their rich traditions and peculiar identity, are the Rabaris, a tribe of camel breeders, spread across the borders of Rajasthan, Gujarat and Haryana. A proud tribe, whose destiny has been closely intermingled with the Rajput ruling caste, the Rabaris have played, as camel and cattle breeders, an important role in the society of the former Rajput states. They proudly trace their descendance from a man created by Mahadeva, another name for Shiva, in order to take care of the first camel he had created for the amusement of his consort Parvati.

Apart from the typical costumes of both males and females, the Rabaris also have distinctive religious practices considered almost unique in Hinduism. Probably as a consequence of their nomadic lifestyle which takes them on a perpetual meandering far from the traditional temple-centered worship, the tribe is given to silent prayer and contemplation, without any need to employ sacred images. Their favourite deity, Mata Devi, is instead worshipped in her natural elements. such as the conch shell.

During periods of abundance, the Rabaris live in the outskirts of villages and small towns, but by the end of autumn the younger males move with their cattle towards the greener plains of the north. During their long journey through the Thar desert they need to feed the cattle and provide water to the animals. Their migration therefore brings an unwelcome burden to the villages along the route and the use of water and pastures often breeds hostility in the sedentary communities.

Rabaris find it more and more difficult to preserve their traditional way of life and a number of them have had to settle down, renouncing the pastoral life of their forefathers. The Jal Bhagirathi Foundation, while developing village-led water councils (Jal Sabhas), must therefore take into account the peculiar challenge posed by nomadic communities, a distinctive facet of the social structure of the Thar desert, whose difficulties are –if possible - even bigger than the one faced by sedentary villagers. The survival of the nomads' identity is seriously at stake

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Picture Courtesy: JBF





Picture Courtesy: JBF





The mourning session

When a death occurs, villagers mourn together for a period of twelve days.
Dharamsar village, Barmer district

Facing page: *Bhil Lady*

The Bhil are, besides the Meena, the only other tribal community of Rajasthan,
Bhila Ki Dani, near Pachpadra Salt, Barmer district

Faraway Madonna

Amidst a gathering of girls displaying elaborate jewellery under bright red and yellow saris, the blue veil and dreamy gaze of this beautiful young lady reminds me of a Renaissance madonna.



Blue eyes, fierce gaze

An old women wearing jewelry ornaments in Rodwa Kurd village,
Barmer District. After an initial resistance, she accepted to unveil and
proudly showed her elaborate jewels.

















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Facing Page: *Past and future*

Glimpses of the modern world sometimes unexpectedly flash in the lives of the women of Marwar. In the muddy hut that serves as kitchen, a smiling lady takes a call on her mobile phone. Rodwa Kurd village, Barmer district.







Complicity
Girls smiles in Dharamsar Village

























Women excavating a water body.

The National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) provides one hundred paid working days per year to each household in rural India. Strickingly enough, in Marwar almost only women avail of the scheme, as men leave the village to work as labourers in the city.







In the quiet hours of afternoons and evenings, old fabric is shredded and spun into new colourful ropes to replace the worn-out weave of the charpois.
Punio Ki Tala, Pachpadra Salt, Barmer district.

Facing page: *A Rabari woman tending the sheep. Around Bhadrajun.*





Picture Courtesy: JBF



The maire's husband

The husband of the Sarpanch (maire) in Aanten, a village of Pali district.

Women can avail of a special quota in the local elections for the post of Sarpanch, but only in exceptional cases is a woman Sarpanch able to rule independently of her family.









Picture Courtesy: JBF

A men from the Pajapat (pot-makers) community, Hamlet of Katnada Ki Dhani,
Jodhpur District

Facing page: *Portrait of a Muslim camel breeder*
Punio Ki Tala, Pachpadra Salt, Barmer District



Hard Working Hands
Stiching activity
helps the familiy with
additional income.





Water for schools

In rural areas, school attendance is closely linked to availability of water. Children from remote hamlets and villages are generally enrolled in the closest government school and have a chance to get at least a minimal education. The attendance rate of teachers is however discontinuous in rural Rajasthan. Regular attendance by



children depends on whether the school has enough stored water to last throughout teaching hours. JBF is also trying to make children more aware of the importance of harvesting and storing water. Some schools have launched a participatory system for children to contribute a nominal fee towards maintenance of water storage.

The village temple
Children entering the village temple. Rodwa
Kurd, Barmer district.















Family portrait

A Bhil family. As in other Rajasthan communities and castes, the girl covers her face as an act of modesty because she is not born in the village, but settled in after marriage. On the contrary, the other woman is native to the place and therefore is allowed to show her face.



Picture Courtesy: JBF



Portrait of a Bishnoi women

Bishnois are animal breeders famous for their love and respect for animals. Around their hamlets one can easily spot deers and other wild animals roaming freely, unafraid of human presence.

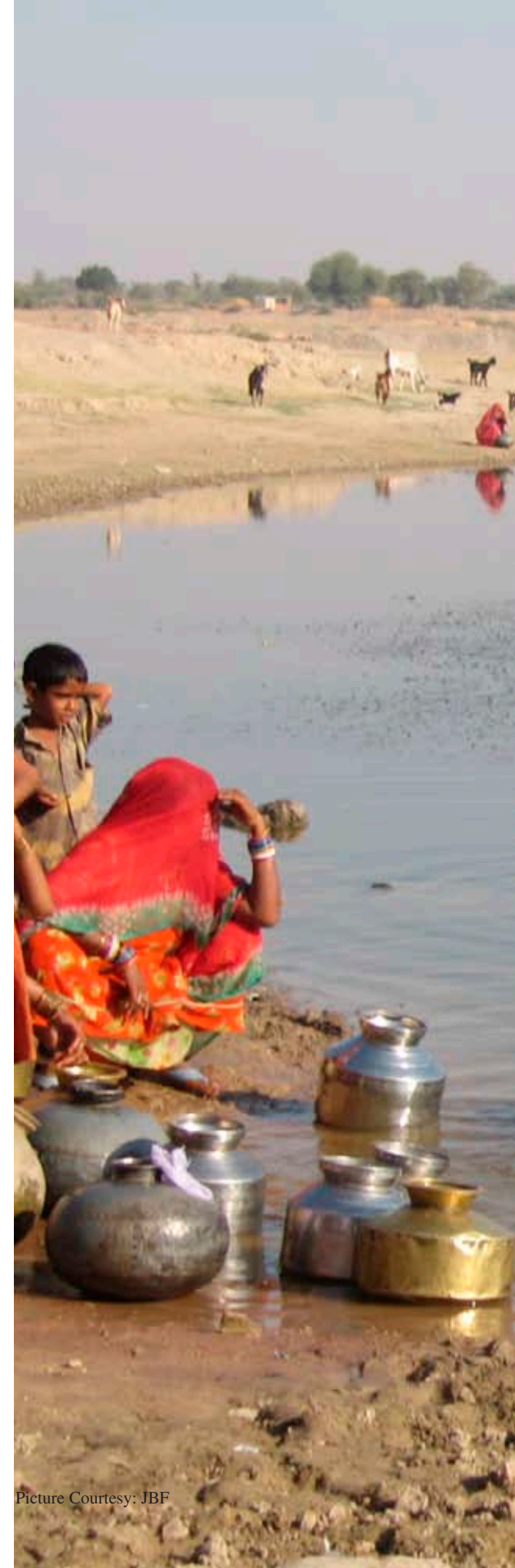




सिंघारि







Picture Courtesy: JBF







The Goldsmith

While small villages are inhabited essentially by farming communities, bigger settlements provide for a more complex social composition and benefit from the presence of traders and craftsmen.



Picture Courtesy: JBF











Picture Courtesy: JBF









Picture Courtesy: JBF

Waiting for the rain

Heavy, foreboding clouds seem to weigh down the usually pristine blue of the Rajasthani sky. They come loaded with a promise of rain which yet remains unfulfilled. It is August 2009, the air is pregnant with a feeling of anguished expectation, it has been one of the worst years so far, almost no rain at all, with two more weeks to go before hope turns into despair. Then, the already meager crops will die. Animals will follow soon after.

Many talabs (ponds) have already dried up, in others the muddy water from last year's abundant monsoon will give its last drops to people and animals before evaporating in the summer heat. "The Gods are angry" people keep telling me in the villages.

The water harvesting works promoted by Jal Bhagirathi Foundation will mitigate the impact of the upcoming drought, especially in the few hamlets where oral traditions of knowledge have been applied by the local population and wells (beris) have been dug which can miraculously draw perennial sweet water out of the otherwise saline underground of the Thar desert. Far more precious than a gold mine these wells may they change the fate of a hamlet and its families. It is, unfortunately, just a drop in an ocean of thirst.

Finally, nature and the erratic cycle of rain will have the last word on whether man will be able to survive the Thar desert.

The warning that comes from the faraway dunes of Rajasthan should serve us city dwellers as a wake up call, for us to abandon the misplaced illusion that our technologies can tame the vagaries of Nature. There is only a little time left for wasteful indulgence, says the parched land of Mewar, and "the Gods are getting angrier".























