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# The Thar Desert and its Travelers

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**Abstract:** *The desert of Thar is popular as Great Indian Desert. This is the most populated desert of the world. The hot and dry environment of this desert has never acted as a hostile feature for the travelers and the dynasties. This desert has been attraction for many royal dynasties to come up in this intense desert and set up kingdoms. The desert has served as a natural border for these kingdoms. The desert is devoid of the water sources so the economic orientation was not at all agricultural. The main source of the income for all the dynasties of Thar desert was the tax levied on the routes (rahdari). This desert had a dense network of the trade routes which were used by the travelers, traders, pilgrims and even the raiders. Being on the routes most of the times all the travelers were depending on the local communities for crossing this desert safely. This requirement made them to connect more well with the routes and all the day to day necessities that emerged on the routes led to the building of many structures for the help of the travelers. The routes were thickly populated with the traders and nomads who participated in the business. The most fascinating community who travelled through these desert roads was of the banjaras. The banjaras were the traders and they acted as the transporters to the armies as well. While travelling through routes they made many other day to day exchanges also and formed part of the popular imagination of the desert. Many spiritual journeys and the cultural encounters and cultural exchanges happened in the Indian subcontinent due to their travelling. Even now the traces of the same are visible. The presence of these nomads on the routes and the inability of the John Company to surveillance them has pushed the colonial masters to draft and execute 'The Criminal Tribes Act 1871'. This paper would like to bring forward the dimensions of the Indian medieval trade in Thar desert and further effort will be made to understand the elimination of the trade routes which were routes of cultural exchange and economic development during the medieval times.*

**Keywords:** *Thar, nomads, trade, animals, breeding, pastorals.*

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## Geo-Cultural History

'*Histoire a part entire* was therefore a history that sought a synthesis of all the material, physical and mental forces that had shaped the life of man in past societies' (Lucas 1987: 4). So, with the efforts of Bloch and Febver, history became a discipline that would bring together geography, psychology, economics, sociology, anthropology, philology and other relevant natural sciences that would help to pull up a total picture of the past societies and their surroundings. This permitted an analysis from the mono-causal to multi-dimensional explanation. Further, it helped to perceive about something that was previously perceived as 'without history' or in language turns of history to be unhistorical. With this the sources for the construction of the unsaid past also expended from the previously accepted conventional and legitimate (considered) material into a large variety of unwritten and unwritten evidences. And, history became a subject matter and domain of the imaginative and enterprising scholars.

None of the deserts over the globe have been considered as the significant part of the ecology as they fail to provide conducive environment and water resources that are essential for survival and agricultural production. Similarly, the desert has not been considered as an active zone for the economic activities. Whereas, the Great Indian Desert presents a picture that is contrary to the perceived desert. During medieval times, the desert of India was an active zone for the trade activities. Massive volumes of trade passed through it. Further, it was an essential landscape for the traders who travelled to north-west or the ones aiming for trade on the silk route.

The significance of Indian desert can be accessed from the large number of activities that are carried out in this arid zone and through the experiences of communities that inhabited in this hot desert. Thar is not uniform in its nature. Throughout its extensively spread large dunes reflect different patterns and structures. In order to understand Thar, it is essential to get some information about its geographical set-up and topography.

'Rajasthan is the collective and classical denomination of that portion of India which is "the abode of Rajput princes". In the familiar dialect of these countries it is termed Rajwara, but by the more refined Raethana, corrupted to Rajputana, the common designation amongst the British to denote the Rajput principalities' (Tod 1920: 1). In the nineteenth century Col. Tod interacted with the Rajput domains and understood it as the abode of Rajputs. The territorial extent of nineteenth century Rajasthan was lying between 'the valley of the Indus on the west and Bundelkhand on the east; to the north, the sandy tracts (south of the Sutlej) termed *Jangaldesh*; and Vindhya mountains to the south' (Tod 1920: 1), prior to the rise of Mandu and Ahmedabad with capitals at Malwa and Gujarat respectively. The administrative extent of the Imperial Rajputana included eighteen native states and two chief-ships (Imperial Gazetteer 1908, 2007: 1). The state as defined by the imperial administration was an irregular rhombus with the boundary lines of the states of Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Banswara and Dholpur. The districts of Ajmer and Merwara were also part of the territorial circle formed under the British administrators. Placing the state in context of its geographical territory, it was bounded by Sindh on west, Bhawalpur is defines the North-western boundary and Punjab is setting north and North-east limit. The eastern frontier of the state was limited by the borders of Oudh and Agra. The above marking of the state frontiers reflects that the territories of India till the beginning of the twentieth century had carried the impact of Mughal administrative distribution. A look at the layout of the various states that existed within the Rajputana at the beginning of the twentieth century will be helpful to understand the geographical and cultural entity of Rajasthan. The states of Jaisalmer, Jodhpur (more popular as Marwar) and Bikaner formed a homogenous group in the west and north. Shekhawati was subject to Jaipur state and along with Alwar (erstwhile Macheri) formed the north-eastern boundary. Jaipur, Dholpur, Karauli, Bundi, Kotah, Jhalawar and Bharatpur formed the

eastern and south-eastern frontier. Sirohi marked the south-west and Pratapgarh, Banswara, Dungarpur, Udaipur formed the southern extent of the state. The district of Ajmer-Merwara and the Kishangarh state were the center. From the above description it can be said that the territories of the state has not shifted much since the twentieth century but all the states that were housed in the Rajputana were more or less, autonomous in their political operations and were under supervision of the imperial masters.

Writing about any landscape shall recognize- legends, folk cultures, their myths, memories and their complicated meanings. To understand a landscape, the nature and the human perception shall not be separated- into two realms. In fact, they should be treated as indivisible. Scholars mention that human beings cooperate with each other for their existence and, therefore, need other souls to arbitrate among them and exercise a restraining influence. This looks very much applicable to the society of Thar, who exchanges with the nature and its elements, with a firm understanding of 'long term bond' that they need to share in order to survive through the harsh, hostile and rude weather conditions. As every science have its own means to express its arguments. Thus, the science and the principles of survival do develop a language of their own, to float the 'arguments of necessity'. Thus, it's a fact that people first need means to survive and later express their intentions. And, in the tough weather conditions to co-operate becomes their very nature, and social organization are made easier by proper expressions. The different types of sources indicate to the activities of the traders and raiders, who were constantly engaging and negotiating with the natural phenomenon.

Ibn Khaldun was the first person to highlight the significance of desert as an economic, social and political arena. His vision and arguments were shaped through his experiences that he encountered while living-in the desert of Cairo (Egypt). For Ibn Khaldun, 'Civilization may be either desert (Bedouin) civilization as found in outlying regions and mountains, in hamlets near suitable pastures in waste regions, and on the fringes of sandy deserts. Or it may be sedentary civilization as found in cities, villages, towns, and small communities that serve the purpose of protection and fortification by means of walls. In all these different conditions, there are things that affect civilization essentially in as far as it is social organization' (Khaldun 1980: 10-11). This approach guided the deserts of the Central Asia. Similarly, it worked in the terrains of Thar with minor deviations of social organization. The changes that knocked on Central Asia in the medieval centuries were diverse and showed the signs of brutality. Similarly, Thar was also not completely at peace! The confrontations in this region were mainly to get control-over the economic resources. The animals constituted main wealth, followed-by the trade-routes that were sources of the direct income in-form of goods and money. The groups who controlled these trade-routes also provided en-route security, and in-returned charged a fee. The acquaintance of inhabitants with the desert routes and along sand-dunes made them well versed in path-finding skill- in and through the extensive desert of Thar. This risk was taken to earn some means for the living.

### **Perceiving a Geographical space**

Distance defines the affection for, approach towards and the treatment of desert by the societies and communities. With the passage of time these shifts become visible in the individuals, and it reflects in their inadequate understanding and inefficiency to encounter the surprises and dangers possessed by the desert, and this keeps them fixed in an illusion where they consider the desert as a puzzle, no to be attempted and with-it desert elevates to the status of a 'no-go area' (Guha, 1999: 4) for them. This stage clearly alienates them and the base of their civilization becomes dead and non-existent. As the desert attitude differs among people at different stages, so does their understanding and treatment. The cultural vibrancy and the social warmth that has been guiding the lives in desert evades away

fast with the multi-layered distances that are created with the desert. The philosophical norms that taught the inhabitants to be physically strong; emotionally contained and mentally firm along with the compassion and utmost respect for the lives and resources also become redundant with the distance. The long-term detachment pushes the desert away from the imaginations and with passage of time, distance and segregation, the desert becomes the place of the savages!

The consistency of various Rajput states in the desert is a constant indicator to the fact that the desert was nourishing all of them efficiently and was an important engrain for their survival and continuity. The absence of efforts by the inhabitants and royals, to move-out of this desert clearly indicates that the Great Indian Desert was not inimical to the nomads, sedentary societies, royal authorizes, cities and civilizations that were developing and prospering in this dry and hot region.

Nearly, a century ago the desert has been defined with all the specifications that were identified by the imperial masters to know the areas better so it can be administered in a better way. For the pre-colonial dynasties the desert was a 'no-go area' (Guha) and the interactions with the desert were only extended to curb and contain the rebelling forces. The forces of Sher Shah and Mughals went upto Nagaur and peripheries of Jodhpur to curb-down the rebellions of Maldeo and make him surrender. The Sanskrit and Persian literature is full of similes and metaphors that are drawn from the nature. The Mughal sources drew comparatives with the nature to convey meanings of the political situations. The traitors were referred as scorpion without self-control in stinging (Fazal, 2010: 576). Similarly, the natural terrains have also been interpreted as per the geographical specifications of terrain, ecological conditions and the spirits of the surrounding space. For Abul Fazal, the desert always represented destruction, bewilderment, waste, wilderness, a place of illusions, purposeless wandering, ignorance, ruin, madness, error, defeat, annihilation, downfall, calamity, folly, imitation, darkness, savages, exile, failure, asceticism etc. Contrary to it the cities were considered as an equivalent of the inquiry, prosperity, civilization and truth. The Mughal court historian has always treated desert as a destination which 'rebels will meet' (Fazal: 434), and the rebels were called 'desert vagabond' (Fazal: 459) and the defeat is an equivalent of 'desert of failure' (Fazal: 466). Two historians- Ibn Khaldun and Abul Fazal- hold two clearly opposite understandings for the desert. The former considered the desert as base of any civilization, whereas the later called it a space of ignorance, error, ruins etc.

While writing in the twelfth century Khaldun made efforts to make maps (with the help of cartographers). He marked the geographical limits of the continents and famous kingdoms (Khaldun 1980: 96-103). In commentaries on the frontiers, Andre Wink do refers to the desert and its wanders that have been mentioned by the Arab geographers around the frontier town of Hind (Wink 1999: 165). Taking from Ibn Hauqal, he says that 'the *Mids* wandered "along the banks of Mihran" from the boundary of Muslim kingdom of Multan to sea, and in desert between Makran and Qamuhul (Famhal), "the frontier town of Hind" (Wink 1999: 165). In 1810-11, Tod dispatched two parties for conducting the survey, 'one to the Indus, the other to the desert south of the Sutlej' (Tod 1920: 5). Further, he mentions about 'the deserts of Dhat, Umrasumra (it joins in Jaisalmer) and many of the states of Rajasthan' (Tod 1920: 6). Idrisi locates the *Mids* outside the desert and confirms the wandering nature of the tribe (Wink 1999: 165). Gradually, confirming the activity area of the *Mids* from the ninth to eleventh century, Wink also established that the interstitial pastures along the Indus and the desert were zones of high nomadic activities along the North-western frontier (Wink 1999: 166). The *Tarikh-i-Sind* (1600 AD) mentions about the desert of Thar. When the authority of Masud (son of Mahmud) was rejected by the people of distant regions, 'the men of Sumara assembled in the neighbourhood of Thari (Thar) and raised a name Sumara to masnad who had passed a long time as the head of the Sumara tribe' (Daudpota 1938: 60). The presence of word 'Thari' in the sources of the ninth and the

eleventh century clearly indicates to usage of this term in the eleventh century and onwards. The western desert has been viewed as '*Thal ka Tiba*' (Tod 1920: 19), which literally means the sand ridges of desert. Luni river marks the 'extensive plain of ever shifting sand, termed in Hindu geography Marusthali, corrupted to Marwar' (Tod 1920: 19). *Thal ka Tiba* is basically a corrupt version of *Thul ka Tiba*, where the word *Thul* signifies- sand, and *Tiba* represents- the dune. Similarly, *Marusthali* is a land brings death due to its harsh dry weather conditions and absence/scarcity of the potable water. Both these terms are still in use and the locals rarely address this western desert of India as Thar. For the inhabitants, this vast desert is only *Dharti dhora ri, ei par dev raman ne aawa; ei ro jas nar-nari gava, dharti dhora ri* (it's the land of undulating sand-dunes, the gods incarnate to inhabit on this land; man and women sing its praise, it's the land of undulating sand-dunes).

In regard of Ptolemy's work, Yule mentioned- *Geography* is 'a precious mine of material for the study of the ancient geography of India' (McCrimdell 1885: 11). Khaldun used work of Ptolemy to mark his map but exclusively, he did not indicate to the desert beyond Indus as 'Thar'. The usage of the term in the eleventh century in and for the region is a substantial proof to believe that the term didn't fell out of use. In nineteenth century while describing about the kingdom of Jaisalmer, Col. Malleon mentions that the descendants of Yadu tribe were pushed out from Punjab by the King of Ghizni and they fled into the Great Indian Desert and 'built a fortress in the desert, which they called Tanot and made it their capital in AD 731' (Malleon 2005: 118). 'Both the archeological finds and certain climatologically features, indicate that Ghaggar did not carry water as a river after the middle of the sixth century AD... the correct climate tradition about this region is also recorded in the *Vamana-Purana*... There were several holy places which were once associated with big ponds, felt helpless against the advancing dunes of sand'(Jain 2016: 573). The vivid descriptions confirm about the desert that was expanding in the region of present Rajasthan due to drying-up of river Ghaggar. As per the geographers 'there are archeological evidence that the region was better watered as recently as the eight century AD and the flow in Ghaggar did not cease until 1790 AD' (Gupta 1975: 11). Thus, the first instance for the expansion of the desert towards the eastern frontier can be located around the 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. All the above specifically defined demarcations and the territorial descriptions of the surroundings indicate to the presence of the Great Indian Desert in the memories and the histories that were written in different times and vivid scholars of contemporary times.

### Imperial Powers and Desert

The surroundings, location, difficulties faced by the imperial forces of Mughal emperor Akbar in and around the Great Indian Desert were recorded (Fazal 2010: 371-75). The imperial forces suffered shortage of food, fodder and water. Fazal referred to the Central Asian desert as *Cul* and mentions that its people are *culi*. He refrains from putting any such label on the inhabitants of the Thar Desert. Perhaps, it was due to the absence of the uniformity in the nomadic groups who were living and traversing in the desert of Thar. He may have desisted from it due to the non-acquaintance with the region and its people who were holding a lot of cultural diversities. The absence of labeling could also be an act of diplomacy as the Mughal Empire during the reign of Akbar was trying to expand its horizons and gain legitimacy over the extensive territories of Hindustan. The aim of these multi directional expansions that were pushed by the imperial power in the sixteenth century were clearly economic, as revenue was essential for imagining and building a grand empire.

'From the north bank of the Luni to the South, and the Shaikhavat frontier to the east, the sandy region commences. Bikaner, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer are all sandy plains, increasing in volume as you proceed westward...Jaisalmer is everywhere encircled by desert; and that portion round the Capital

might not be improperly termed as oasis, in which wheat, barley and even rice are produced. Though all these regions collectively bear the term *Marusthali*, or 'region of Death' the restrictive definition applies to a part only that under the dominion of the Rathor race. From Balotra on the Luni, throughout the whole of Dhat and Umrasumra, the western portion of Jaisalmer and a broad strip between the southern limits of Daudputra and Bikaner, there is real solitude and desolation. But from the Sutlej to the Rann, a space of five thousand miles of longitudinal distance, and varying in breadth from fifty to one hundred miles, numerous oases are found, where the shepherds from the valley of Indus and *Thal* pasture their flocks. The spring of water in these places have various appellations, *tar; par; rar; dar*, all expressive of the element, round which assemble the Rajars, Sodhas, Mangalias and Sahariyas, inhabiting the desert...the valley of Indus and eastward of the stream, the termination of the sand ridges of the desert...of this eastern portion of the valley, which forms the western boundary of desert. A traveller proceeding from Khichi or flats of Sindh to the east, sees the line of the desert distinctly marked, with its elevated *tibas* or sand ridges...these sand-hills are of considerable elevation, and may be considered the limit of the inundation of the 'sweet river', the Mitha Maran, a scythic or Tatar name for river, and by which alone the Indus is known, from the Panjnad to the ocean' (Tod 1920: 21-22). All the above mentioned narratives do help us to understand the geographical extent of the Thar, and with help of all these illustrations it can be said that the extent of the sand hills (*dhoras*) in Thar was and is limited to the regions of Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jodhpur, Ganganagar and Bikaner with a little depletion in the sand dunes as they progress towards Sikar, Jhunjhnu, Churu and Nagaur. Beyond it the effect of the desert was felt till the north-western extent of the Aravalli hills. Broadly, Indus formed the North-western frontier of the Thar and the Aravalli limited its south-eastern extent. The introduction of the Indira Gandhi Canal which carries water up to Jaisalmer, has changed the understanding of desert and has subdued the effect of large tracts of dunes in the lives of inhabitants. The change is very identical to the one defined by Ibn Kahldun, where the Beoudian (nomadic) groups adopted to the sedentary life and became bases for the development of the new societies, which further flourish in cities, civilizations and so on and so forth.

The aforesaid explanations provide that it was an extensive desert with limited food and water supplies. Thus, the inhabitants were surviving on their own local-managements, but 'How?'. Some states made arrangements for the water-harvesting, beyond it no organized efforts are visible to make the situations conducive for life.

It is evident that the ruling houses of Thar were not docile to the dynasties who ruled from the imperial capitals- Delhi or Agra till the mid of the sixteenth century. This can be related to the psychological impact and the geographical constrain that the dry region was exerting and drawing over the ruling elites. The aridity led to the absence of conducive agricultural conditions and the lack of water resources has marked the area as undesirable for the agriculture-based states. The agricultural revenue of the Ganga-Yamuna Doab formed a major share of the states (Delhi sultanate, Mughal and John Company) incomes. Thus, the region of the Thar was not aspired for the collection of agricultural revenue and supplies.

The expeditions, penetrations and expansions in the region of Thar were mainly and primarily to control the trade-routes that were connecting India with Central Asia and regions beyond. The control over these trade-networks was crucial as these regions were the main lands for import of horses and other luxury items. A large part of exports was also channelizing through these routes. Even after extension of the imperial authority in the region, the center never directly came-in to manage this region. For organizing various activities in the region, the center employed native Rais and Ranas as the intermediaries of imperial power and left the region under their autonomous guidance. Till the

end of the sixteenth century, various ruling dynasties had autonomy in the regions of their respective control. The interference of the imperial state in the desert region set-in only after the acceptance of the Mughal sovereignty by the states (who were in interiors of desert), which was limited to the economic and political controls. The central states never interfered with socio-cultural aspects of the desert due to its nomadic and non-regulatable element. The exclusive treatment that states extended to the trade-routes and the revenue resources clearly depicts the exclusive economic interests of the states.

Even during the times of peace, nearly all the medieval forces were kept active. Albeit, the Mughals were making many exceptions from the medieval kingdoms but they kept the same exercises to maintain their standing forces. To keep the army and soldiers in form, constant drills of war-skills were organized. The forests were considered as the areas of foe, wilderness and surprises which made them fit and perfect grounds to refine and sharpen their skills of war, train soldiers and display the acts of bravery. The control and power exerted over the animal was always defined as a synonym of controlling the rebellions and the acts to curb the wilderness (Choudhary, 2018). The limited vegetation didn't allow the abundance of the sports, whereas, the Persian sources hint at the hunting expeditions organized in the regions of Ajmer, Nagaur etc. These hunts were limited to *nilgais*, gazelles, deer and some small animals. The rationale that guided the movements of the imperial forces was the abundance of wildlife in the forests surrounding the capital cities and the various *sarkar* headquarters (such as Mandu, Gujarat, Delhi, Silkot, Rohtas etc.).

Throughout the human history the necessities were always on a higher pedestal than the hobbies. The later was maintainable only when the resources were available above the benchmark of survival and subsistence. The environmental conditions of the Thar desert acted as natural deterrent against the movement of the large imperial forces in its dry regions. Khaldun helps to understand the texture of desert and the negotiations set-in (or employed) by the varied travelers. 'Al-Mas'udi also mentioned that one of the Himyar kings after Afriqus, Dhul-Adh'ar, who lived in the time of Solomon, raided the Maghrib (a desert of North Africa) and forced it into submission. Something similar is mentioned by al-Mas'udi concerning his son and successor, Yasir. He is said to have reached the Sand River in the Maghrib and to have been unable to find passage through it because of the great mass of sand. Therefore, he returned....Soldiers traveling in regions other than their own have to requisition grain and livestock and to plunder the countries they pass through. As a rule, such a procedure does not yield enough food and fodder. On the other hand, if they attempted to take along enough provisions from their own region, they would not have enough animals for transportation. So, their whole line of march necessarily takes them through regions they must take possession of and force into submission in order to obtain provisions from them. Again, it would be at most unlikely and impossible assumption that such an army could pass through all those nations without disturbing them, obtaining its provisions by peaceful negotiation....Although Maghrib has often been crossed and its roads have been explored by travelers and raiders at all times and in every direction' (Khaldun, 1980: 62-3). This narrative defines the problems and managements that were required to be put-in place by the traders and raiders before and while travelling through any intense desert.

Humayun's struggle with Sher Shah pushed him in exile. During exile, in search of asylum, he travelled through some parts of the Thar Desert. He experienced the region of Bikaner, Nagaur, Phaludi, Satalmer and Jaisalmer (Beveridge, 2010: 374). The illusionary nature of Thar Desert can be accessed from the fact that 'whilst the officers who had been dispatched to check them, had lost their way and gone-off in another direction' (Beveridge 2010: 374). Maldeo denied asylum to Humayun, so the later turned towards Jaisalmer. It seems that troubles were awaiting upon Humayun in the desert

when after turning towards Jaisalmer 'Rai Lonkaran took out of wickedness, the position of hostility and set guard over the water-pond, so the royal army which has experienced the toils of the desert and has come from a wilderness of mirages to this evil halting-place, was put to trouble from want of water' (Beveridge 2010: 375). In 1542 AD, Humayun came to Jaisalmer looking for asylum. Lunkaran denied refuge to him and he was charged for killing cows (Gahlot, 1937: 669). Further, the Thar Desert has been described as 'that waterless and grain less Sahara where it was difficult to find any trace of corn, the caterers for the holy court were in despair, when suddenly a man brought a bag full of millet (jaware) for sale' (Beveridge, 2010: 375). Sher Shah also did not have good experience in Thar. After ensuring victory, 'against Maldeo the lord of Ajmer, Nagor and many other cities' (Beveridge 2010: 400), he said in despair that 'for a handful of bajra (millet) he had nearly lost the empire of Hindustan' (Sharma, 1968: 13). In the 19th century, Col. Tod had a similar experience that has been noted as 'the sand, since we crossed Luni, had become gradually heavier, and was quite fatiguing as we approached the capital of "the region of death"'.

For the Mughals, the Desert of Thar was a region to be left with its own inhabitants for the management and apparently, the situation of law and order in desert didn't bother them much. Might be for the same reason, the desert was left with the Rajputs whose dynasties were housing in Thar as *watan-jagirs*. As mentioned above the desert for the Mughals of India (those who were no more in their exile (Fazal, 2010: 371-72), literally emperors who reigned Akbar onwards) was the synonym of decline and was the region for ending and concluding various unpleasant events and ill-assorted personas of state. The illusions of desert were used for the burial of various unaccepted and disapproved events of the state. Here, the execution and expulsion of Baihram Khan justified the professional approach of the state.

With the introduction of Islam in this region during the medieval centuries, this approach got altered to another degree. Arrival of Moinuddin Chisti in this region around the end of twelfth century also caused a direct disparity. Now, Ajmer was directly connected to Delhi and the exchanges between both the regions became regular. Whereas earlier, Ajmer, was tapped occasionally being an alternate capital of the Chauhan Rajputs. The sultanate interacted with this region only for the collection of revenue and at times to assert the political victory-Adhai din ka Jhopra. Later, with expansion of the 'religious frontier' (Eaton, 1993) of Islam, the Chisttis established shrines at Ajmer, Nagaur, Ajodhan etc. With these changes and new introduction in the regions of Nagaur and Ajmer, the interaction with this region changed for both the political and religious reasons. The Sufi centers of Ajmer and Nagaur emerged as popular centers of Islamic educational and religious activities.

The strategic importance of Nagaur can also be accessed by analyzing the fact that as a jagir Nagaur was always assigned to the most trustworthy officials. During the early years of Akbar's reign, Nagaur was jagir of Bairam Khan. Later, it was allotted to Munim Khan and many other officials who enjoyed the trust of emperor. When Bairam Khan rose in rebellion, he was jagirdar of Nagaur. To save mis-happening and strengthen the imperial control, 'Nagor and its territory were given to M. Sharifuddin Hussain' immediately (Fazal, 2010: 155). After reconciliatory round, when Bairam Khan escaped from Agra. In reaction, the first order given by Akbar was 'the word-traversing standards should advance from Delhi and establish themselves at Nagor, so that Bairam Khan might not be able to plant his foot in that region' (Fazal: 152). During Bairam Khan's rebellion, Sharifuddin Husain got charge of Nagaur, as one of Akbar's most trusted official. His credentials of 'real worthlessness and insubstantiality became' manifested in 1562 AD when he escaped from the capital of Agra for 'Ajmer and Nagor which were his jagirs' (Fazal: 303). On getting information of his escape the first order Akbar gave was, 'that one of his trusty servants should be appointed to the province of Nagor' (Fazal:303). To execute emperor's orders, Husain Quli Beg was immediately promoted and the title



of Khan was conferred upon him and he was sent-off to take charge of Nagaur (Fazal: 304). The significance of Nagaur, Jalore, Sojat, Jaisalmer, Ajmer, Bikaner and Pali was due to their strategic geographical locations and immense trade that passed through and exchanged at these centers, before getting dumped into the destined markets.

It would be interesting to know why, when and how these ruling houses landed in the desert. The earliest ruling house was of Thanot (Jaisalmer), and they arrived in the area due to the expulsion experienced at hands of the Gahzni in the eight century. The settlement of Rathors in the Thar, started when 'the splendor of this monarchy...weakened by its contest with the Chauhans of Delhi, it fell a pray to the invaders, and 'in sambat 1268 (AD 1212), eighteen years subsequent to the overthrow of Kanauj, Seoji and Sait Ram, grandsons of its last monarch, abandoned the land of their birth, and with two hundred retainers, the wreck of their vassalage, journeyed westward to the desert with the intent, according to some of the chronicles, of making a pilgrimage to the shrine of Dwarka, but according to others and with more probability, to carve their fortunes in fresh fields unscathed by the luxuries in which they had been tried, and proud in their poverty and sole heritage, the glory of Kanauj' (Powlett, 2017: i). Thus, the Rathors under the leadership of Seoji reached the wilds (desert) of Marwar and nearly after two hundred years of the migration into the desert, the capital of Marwar was established in 1459 AD.

The efforts of Rao Seoji, Solanika, Aasthan, Kanha Dev, Rao Raipal, Rao Viram Dev and Chunda (s/o Viram) towards the formation of Marwar State (Jodhpur) were immense. Rao Jodha, son of Rao Ranmal laid the foundation of Jodhpur city. He was a skilled warrior and the credit for consolidation of the Marwar kingdom goes to him. Constant attacks of Rana Kumbha forced Rao Jodha in exile. Rao Jodha travelled in the desert during exile and collected horse riders for composing troops. During exile, he met Sankhla Harbuji Mahrajot who was living near Phalodi. Being a man of resources, Harbuji use to arrange feasts (*ghani mung bajri ro khich ran,d daal rotiya pahte kheer goras saro taiyaar karnai rakhiya*) and fed people. On receiving Rao Jodha and his retinue (guests), the feast of fest was also offered to them (Nainsi, 1968: 33). In the 14th century, Rathors got control over Pokharan, after marriage of Pir Ramdeo's daughter to Rathor Hamir. Ramdeo left the region in favour of his son-in-law, Hamir, and moved to village Runicha. At Runicha, he established his abode and today, Runicha is popular for Ramdeora. In vs 1600/1543 AD, Maldeo fought with Badshah Akbar. In vs 1604/1547 AD and vs 1607/1550 AD, Maldeo took control of Phalodi and Pokhran respectively. After victory over Pokhran he moved to west and took Barmer (Nainsi, 1968: 63).

Amongst the desert states, Jaisalmer holds a distinct identity. As per the traditional belief, the foundation of Jaisalmer fort was laid down in vs 1212/1155 AD. Devidas of Jaisalmer was succeeded by his son Jait Singh II in 1496 AD. In c.1528, Karan Singh II came to throne but later stepped down, when his elder brother Lunkaran returned from Kabul. Lunkaran died in c. 1550 and was succeeded by his son Maldev. During the reign of Maldev, Jaisalmer was constantly under attacks from Qandharis and Rathors. These attacks considerably weakened the defense of state, to the extent that once the Rathors of Jodhpur besieged and captured Jaisalmer. Later, on payment of huge sum of money, Jaisalmer was resorted to Bhattis (Nand 1990:12). Maldev was succeeded by Rawal Har Rai, a political animal. In order to stabilize his authority, Rawal Har Rai formed matrimonial alliances with Mughals and Governor of Sindh. In 1577 AD, after death of Rawal Har Rai, Bhim came to the throne. Bhim was in service of Mughal court and was a trusted servant of the state. After a few weak successors in between, Rawal Sabal Singh acceded to the throne. He was in service of Shahjahan's imperial army. He proved himself outstanding at Peshwar by protecting the royal treasure from the Afghans. This remarkable act of bravery helped him to secure the throne of Jaisalmer and he ruled till 1659 (Nand 1990:14). Amar Singh, son of Sabal Singh, succeeded to Gaddi of Jaisalmer after death of his father. As an able ruler,

Amar Singh was successful in putting an end to robberies in his kingdom. He built the Amreshwar shiv temple and Amarsar dam. These activities (of public works) indicate that Jaisalmer was regaining its health under the sovereignty of Mughal empire. The cordial relations between the Mughals and Bhattis lasted long. Though, the Mughal state withered away in the 18th century, even then the fading association between the Mughals and the Jaisalmer house continued till the 19th century. It comes out explicitly in the letter written by emperor Bahadur Shah to the Maharawal Ranjit Singh of Jaisalmer, requesting him to send armies to help the cause of 1857 and further he requests Maharawal to finish all English men that were in the territories of Jaisalmer (Kaya & Mallenson, 1897: 334).

The John Company was also interested in the desert of Thar due to the resources available in its territories. The presence of limestone, stone and gypsum mines were main attractions along with the richness in a variety of buff, or brown colour sand stone of extremely fine texture. The camels of Jaisalmer were famous for their speed and hardiness. They were the only successful means of transport to negotiate through the dense deserts. During Afghan wars in 1838-9, the British took assistance from Jaisalmer state. The valuable assistance was provided to the British army by supplying camels and other articles for which company tendered special thanks (Erskine, 1909:16).

Most of the cities in Thar attained their stability during the medieval centuries. Amongst these Jaisalmer is the earliest and being found in the late eighteenth century, the *thikana* of Sikar is last. The Bhattis of Jaisalmer formed their capital in the Great Indian Desert by building a fortress called Tanot and made it their capital in AD 731 (Malleon 2005: 118). The most significant amongst the desert states was Jodhpur (Marwar) and its foundation was laid by Rao Jodha in VS1515/1459AD (Powlett: i). The Kachwahha Rajputs were ruling over the Amber kingdom- a very small territory. Their fortunes rose only after formation of an alliance with the Mughals in 1564AD. Rao Bika, was sixth son of Rao Jodha (Marwar). He left Jodhpur in 1465 AD and laid foundation of Bikaner in 1489AD (Powlett 2017: 1-3). So, it can be proposed that all these cities in the Thar desert came-up around during medieval centuries and by the eighteenth century, all of these were able to secure their respective arenas.

Writing in reference of Alauddin Khilji's attack on Chittor, Tod notes, 'Jaisalmer, Gagraun, Bundi, the abodes of the Bhatti, the Khichi and the Har, with many of minor importance, suffered all the horrors of assault from this foe of the race, though destined again to raise their heads. The Rathors of Marwar and the Kachwhahas of Amber were yet in a state of insignificance: the former were slowly creeping into notice as the vassals of the Pariharas, while the latter could scarcely withstand the attack of the original Mina population' (1920: 312). The Jaipur kingdom gained prominence through a marriage alliance that was celebrated at Sambhar in March 1562AD (Prasad, 1966: 8). After it, the Kachwahha house constantly rose to eminence and its members held high offices in the Mughal state. Looking at the sporadic rise of the Amber Kingdom, the kingdom of Jodhpur (Zigler, 1978; 1976), Jaisalmer (Fazal: 518) and Bikaner state (Fazal: 518) also formed matrimonial alliance with the Mughals and secured their fortunes. All these developments were crucial for the political settlements and to secure the positions.

### **Shaping Cultures of Survival**

Since civilization and cultures progress gradually and penetrates its gradual rooting progress where it can survive and exists, but it doesn't sustain in the place where it is not owned or has not been allowed to flourish and grow at a regular pace. The exit of civilization is assured, when it is constantly pushed into shock, thrashed and not provided some time to sustain on its own. The Rathors have been able to sustain themselves in the desert of Thar for nearly two hundred years and gradually it formed the base for the foundation of a capital, which culminated as Marwar. The proposition propounded by Khaldun, 'Only tribes held together by group feeling can live-in the desert (Khaldun, 1980: 170)', too proves

true in case of Thar desert. The political economy of community feeling and their interaction came out loud with the formation of the Marwar state (Jodhpur). It is possible that the absence of a leader and the community affiliation might work as factors of disintegration. History is witness to this fact that many dynasties collapsed in absence of the effective leadership. The absence of the resources, defense and constant exposure to the tough life was sufficient for the community to come-up together and aspire jointly. The restraining influence among Bedouin tribes comes from their *shaykhs* and leaders. It results from the great respect and veneration they generally enjoy among the people. The hamlets of Bedouins are defended against outside enemies by a tribal militia composed of noble youths of the tribe who are known for their courage. Their defense and protection are successful only if they are a closely-knit group of common descent. This strengthens, their stamina makes them feared, since everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else). Compassion and affection for one's blood relations and relatives exist in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men. It makes for mutual support and aid, and increases the fear felt by the enemy. Those who have no one of their own lineage (to care for) rarely feel affection for their fellows.

In the Sand Ocean, the Rathors and Bhattis stayed for a long period and this consistency of stay along with the community feeling led to the foundation of a capital cities in the heart of Thar. Later, the developments around the capital paved path for the cultural invocations and assimilations. No dynasty establishes itself firmly in lands with many different tribes and groups. It will be rare or impossible to see a state not based on kinship and clan associations in the desert (Manz, 1989). It is evident from various studies that the social and political organization of all the desert states such as Jaipur, Jodhpur, Jaisalmer and Bikaner depended heavily on the kin and clan relationships and the clout of power was a shared entity amongst the active members. Political studies suggest, it is easy to establish a dynasty in lands that are free from group feelings and community affiliations. Running government in such area will be a tranquil affair, because seditions and rebellions will be few, and there the ruling dynasty does not need much group feeling. All the situations and associations that were required to push the state formation in a desert were present in Thar and were based on the network of the clan relationships which worked favorably for Rathors, Kachhwahas, Bhattis. So, it is evident that the physiology of desert is no barrier to the developments of the human society. The sedentary lifestyle adopted by the immigrant Rathors paved way for the civilizational and cultural developments.

The Egypt and Syria in the fourteenth century were 'free from tribes and group feelings; indeed, one would never suspect that Syria had once been a mine of them...Royal authority in Egypt is most peaceful and firmly rooted, because Egypt has few dissidents or people who represent tribal groups. Egypt has a sultan and subjects. Egypt's ruling dynasty consists of the Turkish rulers and their groups. They succeed each other in power, and the rule circulates among them, passing from one branch to another' (Khaldun 1980: 220-1). Both these cities are located in the heart of vast deserts. A similar kind of picture is visible in the desert of Thar, which is an opera of many nomadic groups but none of them become a dominant force and therefore, the political power continued in the branches of ruling houses.

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