



30 year old tanka in Tawarwala ki dhaani
(Photo credits: Neha Meena, 2017).

Ruins of pastoralism in the Western Rajasthan borderland

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On the western border of Rajasthan (India), adjacent to Pakistan, pastoralist communities like the Raikas sustain themselves these days primarily with canal-based agriculture. Prior to Indian independence in 1947 their way of life was generally characterised by livestock (mainly camels and sheep), and movements associated with animals in search of grazing and water. The changes in the traditional lives of the inhabitants are a result of significant political events, such as the Partition of India (1947), the India-Pakistan wars of 1965 and 1971, irrigation-based development (such as the land settlement schemes of the 1950s-1980s and the extension of the Indira Gandhi Canal in the 1980s), and the complete sealing of the India-Pakistan border in the 1990s. Against this background, this article explores the social, political, and environmental entanglements that have led to the (social) ruination of pastoralism, and focuses on the implications those ruins have had on the pastoral way of life and the pastoralists' notions of belonging, history, and identity.

The Thar Desert has a rich history of the circulation of people, commodities, cattle, ideas, and services. The mobile communities of the desert had close connections and associations across the regions of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Sindh, and even Afghanistan, prior to Partition. However, in 1947 the India-Pakistan international border was demarcated and it passed right through the Thar Desert, separating these well-connected areas (in terms of trade and socio-economic exchange) of present-day Rajasthan, Kutch, Sindh, and Bahawalpur. The Thar frontier, a crossroads of geographical, environmental, social, cultural and economic relations, was thus suddenly split between two nation-states: India and Pakistan. The demarcation of the border, along with the associated security practices, heavy militarisation, and checkpoints, has severely impacted the traditional lifestyles of the inhabitants in these areas. The ensuing regulations on varied forms of previously unregulated mobilities, and irrigation-based developmental initiatives through canal extension, aimed to encourage a settled lifestyle and agrarian expansion. Consequently, many semi-nomadic pastoral communities like the Raikas established themselves in *dhanis* (small settlements) near the western border areas of Bikaner with agriculture as their prime source of income. The modern Indian state's encouragement of a sedentary lifestyle, and the enhancement of agricultural practices through the development of the Indira Gandhi Canal, transformed western Rajasthan and the lives of people who live there. The ruination

of the pastoral lifestyle is observable in the memories and experiences of the pastoralists, and in the decline of pastoral practices, such as the traditional branding of the community's livestock (*daag*) and the underground rainwater storage tanks littered throughout the desert (*tanka*).

Ruins of social, cultural and economic pastoral life

The Thar Desert comprises mainly vast barren lands, but for the occasional variation of grasses, and in some parts continuously moving sand dunes. The villagers of western Bikaner live in extreme arid conditions with frequent food shortages. However, for many generations, the mobile communities adapted to the desert environment, reflected in their way of life (such as their special relationship with animals). For semi-nomadic pastoralists and tribes of the Thar, mobility was not only an important means of survival, but also their socio-cultural identity. Tradition, custom, livelihood, religion, and socio-political position in society may differ between the various groups, but the idea of 'mobility' was central to their ways of life and still remains ingrained.¹

According to the popular narrative of groups within the region, pastoralists followed the semi-nomadic lifestyle of moving livestock during the dry season and a settled life of cultivating crops in the rainy season. Irrigation was only possible during the rainy season (termed as *berani-kheti* by the villagers), and so subsistence relied on livestock products for the rest of the year. Villagers learned to depend less on water and more on buttermilk (*Chaach*) and milk (i.e., camel milk). The natural vegetation of the region such as *sewan* grass, *phog*, *khejri* tree, and wild grasses, sustained the animals. During the drought and dry season, people survived on animal products, such as wool, meat, milk, and dung; either for self-consumption, sale, or exchange for other household goods.² Depending on the environmental conditions many communities even adopted a combination of occupations for livelihood and survival. For instance, the Meghwals, Naiks, and Kumhars were involved in agricultural labour, along with the rearing of livestock.

The western Thar region contained mainly brackish-water wells that were used primarily for watering livestock or consumed by villagers during the dry season and in times of drought, after mixing it with buttermilk and pearl millet flour/*bajra*.³ Given the scarcity

of water and arid conditions, rainwater was stored in the underground water-tanks (locally termed as *tanka/kund*) for drinking and other household purposes. The villagers built these *tankas* by digging a hole of up to 300 feet deep, then plastering the opening with a layer of gypsum and ash (*rakh*) and covering with a wooden lid; water was stored for at least seven months in these *tankas*. During periods of water shortage, women and men would collect water from the *tankas*,⁴ and this was mixed with brackish well water for the animals. Throughout pre-independence, even crops (like *bajra*, *guar*) were cultivated on the sandy tracts of the desert with the usage of camels for tilling and sowing seeds. In addition, camels were essential for migration and transportation to distant locations of the desert.

With the system of rainwater tanks the people were able to meet their drinking water needs to some extent, but for the requirements of their large herds of livestock they would seasonally migrate to other, more humid, areas. Depending on the intensity of the dry conditions, the movements ranged from days to months, to even a year. For these migrations, most of the communities maintained cordial socio-economic relations.

Remembering a migratory experience, an elderly Bishnoi man from Mankasar narrated that during one of the periods of *akaal* (drought), they migrated to the village Gegda (presently named 400 RD after the canal distributory crossing through it), a settlement near the main canal and lived there for a year with their entire family and livestock. Anyone in Mankasar with livestock would migrate,

and only a few elderly people were left behind. These migrations could be up to 70-80 km towards the western and north-western Bikaner as water in those areas was favourable for drinking. Also, based on the good socio-economic relations between the Bishnois and the inhabitants of

Poogal village, they were provided with land for temporary settlement, and were allowed to graze their livestock on the village pastures. Such associations maintained by communities during their migrations and exchanges across the desert have been completely destroyed in the present.

Before the Partition, the entire border region was open. There was a continuous flow of goods and people across the desert, including the states of Sindh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Punjab. These movements in the dry or drought periods were mainly towards humid and rain-fed areas with an aim to access the markets as well as grazing areas for livestock. The social, economic, and cultural life of the inhabitants was dependent on animals—cows for milk, goats for milk and meat, sheep for wool, and camels for transportation and milk. The elderly generations of Raika, Bishnoi, Meghwal, Kumhar and Rajput communities, residing in the desert for decades, narrated their subsistence on seasonal agriculture with predominant dependence on livestock products, such as milk, wool, and dung.⁵ For instance, during the seven year long *Satkali* famine sheep wool was sold to the *baniyas* (merchants) who would sell it further in the nearby markets. In return, villagers received money which sustained them for at least 4-6 months. This pastoral relationship between animals and human beings in the desert areas of Thar is still remembered in the folkloric traditions, myths and memories of the elderly generations.

Caste-based distinctions between communities are an essential part of the pastoral lifestyle in these rural areas, visible in the daily lives of the communities as well

as their narratives of the past.⁶ The camel, an essential part of Thar lifestyle, has also been symbolically used to maintain caste-based distinctions and social boundaries between communities. Since many of the communities, irrespective of their socio-cultural identity, bred camels and moved during the dry season, *daag* (branding) was used on the body of the camel to represent caste and

ownership. As narrated by Raika pastoralists, the unique mark on the body of a camel could be used to identify the community and village to which that camel belonged. This mark even helped people in tracing misplaced camels to their owners.

Rainwater tanks (*tankas*) and the symbolic marks on a camel body (*daag*) were the material representations of the pastoral culture/lifestyle of the Thar region. However, political, social, economic and environmental changes have led to the decline of dependency on these practices, leading to an identity crisis for pastoral communities. The crucial event which decimated the pastoral culture of the Thar-desert was the legal demarcation of India-Pakistan border in 1947 and the subsequent wire-fencing and militarisation of the border. This transformed the desert into the geo-politically sensitive border in western India. Such practices to maintain territorial security were accompanied by developmental policies, like the extension of irrigation canals in the region. With the construction of canal lines through the barren desert of Bikaner in the late 1980s, the Rajasthan state government aimed to encourage settled agriculture on the lands distributed to the people. However, with the restrictions on free movement of people and decline of pasture lands, settled agriculture emerged as the only source of livelihood for the pastoral communities. To encourage canal-based agriculture, the government allotted land to lower caste groups,⁷ provided agriculture-related monetary subsidies for the construction of water-tanks in the fields and establishment of new markets for the sale of farm produce. Therefore, the restrictions on pastoral movements in search of pastures to nearby areas, militarisation of the region, and development of canal system, gradually led to the ruination of pastoralism, visible in the unused rainwater tanks in the fields and decline in the usage of caste-based symbols on the bodies of camels.

Ruins of pastoralism: loss of culture and traditional livelihood

Conversations with elderly Raika pastoralists living near the India-Pakistan border, revealed that even after the Partition pastoralists attempted and struggled to maintain their traditional pastoral routes across the region. For instance, villagers who were unaware of the new cross-border legalities after Partition tried to move across the newly formed border to graze their animals and search for water resources. Some pastoralists were even able to develop close associations with the Indian Army on the border check-posts and were able to move across the border with their animals through permits issued by the Army. However, as told by elderly Raikas, this soon came to an end with the arrest of pastoralists by the Pakistani Army and eventually, the wars between India and Pakistan in 1965 and 1971 led to the complete fencing of the western border in the late 1990s, thereby restricting all cross-border movements. The pastoralists responded to these restrictions by altering their migratory routes to fertile areas within India. However, even these movements declined with the decrease in pasture areas as a result of land settlement policies of the Rajasthan government, extension of the Indira Gandhi Canal, and a prolonged series of droughts and famines within the region. Also, since the 1980s, the grazers (now confined to a few pastoral groups) were required to obtain permits from the *panchayat* (local civic bodies) and police to cross regional state borders with their animals. Gradually, all kinds of mobilities and cross-border interactions of the people across the desert came to an end. Meanwhile, between 1960 and 1980, there occurred a series of droughts and famines in western Rajasthan. During this period, the government provided necessities like food, water and medicines, however, no such measures were taken for animals which decimated the livestock population of the pastoralists and the villagers alike (as narrated by pastoralists residing in western Bikaner). In addition, road construction and the canal development project was initiated by the government with an objective to provide employment and means of livelihood to the inhabitants through settled agriculture. Indira Gandhi Canal, one of the most significant development projects, was extended from Ganganagar district in the north-west to three western border districts of Rajasthan, i.e., Bikaner, Jaisalmer and Barmer, and by the late 1980s canal water was supplied to the villages of western Bikaner.⁸ With such initiatives, villagers with a pastoral lifestyle were encouraged towards canal-based agriculture

and a sedentary way of life. They were encouraged to work either as labourers or practice agriculture with the canal water. The construction of the canal and people's dependence on it has transformed the traditional pastoral lifestyle and the culture of livestock-keeping in the region.

Today, the majority of the population is dependent on agriculture in the fields allotted through summary settlement by the Rajasthan government.⁹ Movements with animals remain confined to some pastoralist families, and only for shorter distances. With social, political and economic changes, pastoralists are forced to keep very small groups of animals only within the range of their village area. Instead, all communities irrespective of their socio-cultural identity as pastoral groups are engaged in agriculture. While reminiscing about their movements across the desert with large flocks of animals and livestock production, many of the elderly Raika pastoralists narrated that, due to the shortage of canal water and rainfall, agriculture in the desert was not as successful compared to their former practices of migratory livestock rearing. However, with no other livelihood alternative, they can only remember their past life and live amidst the ruins of pastoralism. The old empty rainwater tanks in their fields continuously remind them of their mobility and socio-cultural pastoral relations. The remembrance of a past life illustrates the emotional and psychological forms of ruin ingrained in their daily and cultural life, which will have a long-lasting impact even on their future generations.

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Notes

- 1 Dependency on camels and sheep has been associated with their socio-cultural identity. The claims on traditional identity are often observed in the oral narratives, and folkloric histories of the Rajasthan state. For instance, in the folklores of Panjir, Gogaji, Tejaji and Pabuji of Rajasthan, the saints who are also worshipped as local deities have been presented as the protectors of cattle (cow in the case of Gogaji and camel by Pabuji), a saviour of mankind and pastoral wealth, and as one who sacrificed life for protection of livestock; see Kumar, M. 2014. 'Adaptations to Climatic Variability: Irrigation and Settlement Patterns in Early Medieval Rajasthan', *The Medieval History Journal* 17(1):57-86.
- 2 For instance, villagers would exchange wool, ghee (butter), and pearl millet with shop owners, to meet their needs of alternative goods such as clothes, jaggery, sugar, oil, and other household items. The shop owners would then sell those exchanged goods in the market for money.
- 3 In Barsalpur village, there were two saltwater wells, the water of which was used for livestock on a rotational basis. The village elders along with Barsalpur Rav (Thakur) would organise a meeting in which villagers who owned animals were assigned a day for using the well water as per their total number of animals. According to the system, villagers who moved with their animals in the nearby areas (termed as *khod* by locals) would return to the village wells every 2-3 days to water their animals on their assigned day.
- 4 Men would carry water in huge bags loaded on the back of a camel. With the coming of the wooden cart in the 1950s, water was transported in big plastic water tanks. Those plastic tanks were later replaced with iron water tanks.
- 5 The dung of animals was used as fertilizer.
- 6 Some members of Meghwal community mentioned caste based hierarchies in the usage of water from the *tankas*.
- 7 Stanbury, P.C. 1987. *Processes of village community formation in an agricultural settlement scheme: The Indira Gandhi Nahar Project, India*. PhD diss., University of Arizona.
- 8 Idem.
- 9 Land of twenty-five *bigha* was allotted to each household.



Daag on a camel's body (Photo credits: Neha Meena, 2017).