

**My experience in the Thar Desert**

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Visiting the Thar Desert and witnessing how tribal communities live with scarce natural resources in India's northwest Rajasthan state was a memorable lifetime experience.

I have always admired tribal people and their capacity to live in the wild together with dangerous animals and without having the facilities of the Western modern life, such as electric shower systems, air conditioning, cars, drug stores, fast food restaurants, supermarkets, computers and everything else we are so dependent on.

In March, 2016, I headed into the depths of the Thar Desert which covers sixty percent of Rajasthan where water, food and other essential resources are always in short supply.

While I was on the bus heading to the heart of the desert, I took the time to carefully observe and contemplate the arid landscape and its hidden wonders. The intense sunlight poses a burden to all living creatures that struggle to survive the constraints of living under such a harsh climate. But many different forms of life can be seen in this very arid environment. Few tall trees and shrubs dominate the landscape of the desert's sandy floor as they adapt to discouraging conditions of soil and rainfall and give a touch of hope to endemic wildlife that have found ways to adapt and thrive. Peacocks, when out of the shade, display their mesmerizing bluish-green feathers which glimmer and brings colour to the desert's pastel coloured landscape. Small gazelles hop around bushes like ballet dancers. Tiny birds acrobatically swerve through the branches of prickly trees and slow walking camels are the means of transportation helping the desert people commute from place to place.

## Visiting the Thar Desert



Now, the most amazing and challenging situation was to discover the way people live and survive in the Thar Desert as annual rainfall is particularly low. The desert forms a natural

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boundary between India and Pakistan and its geographic isolation by mountain ranges and plains contributes significantly to the weather patterns that shape its distinctive, hot and dry weather.

If I were to live in the desert's inhospitable environment it would probable make me want to flee from it and seek sanctuary elsewhere, especially knowing that I would have to walk many kilometres to fetch water on a regular basis.





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Desert women are very tough. They walk for hours in order to fetch water from lakes to supply their family daily needs. They carry pottery jugs of brackish water on their heads. Their colourful, yet very simple saris dance in the wind. They protect their faces from the intense sunlight and from sand storms using a kind of veil which still allows them to see through. Many young girls help their mothers in this daunting task instead of attending school. Water is a very precious resource for them and they use it for various purposes: drinking, cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and even for the practice of small scale agriculture. Hopefully, their hardship has been alleviated a bit due to the fact that now, a few water tanks can be found nearer to their homes. They collect this water through a hand pump which is connected to the underground rainwater harvesting tank.

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Increased water scarcity due to change in rainfall patterns and wrecking droughts brought some desert communities to address the situation. As a way to tackle the problem, villagers have deepened the talabs (small ponds) increasing the catchment area that harvests even



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scanty rainfall elevating its capacity to store water for longer periods of time throughout the year. The talabs have become a symbol of life as they provide drinking water to all villages around them.

Apart from this, the very few houses that have a regular roof are equipped with gutters which harvest scanty rainfall. The other houses are traditional mud huts build in a circular shape. The gutters enable the collection of rainwater that is then stored and distributed to the rest of the community.

These simple, yet effective small-scale water harvesting methods and drought prevention measures have enabled the Thar Desert communities to become less vulnerable and more resilient to the negative effects of climate change. The role water storage plays in enhancing the community's resilience and adaptation in drought prone areas is highly significant. Preparedness and prevention has transformed the almost uninhabitable environment and made it more suitable for living.

I have also learned that all these efforts illustrate how enhancing the availability of potable water frees up women's time and energy and leads to improvements in poor people's health, education, income generation capacity and social well-being.



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Now, apart from witnessing their techniques to capture and store water, I was granted the opportunity to watch a very nice typical folk dance performance. Two skilled female tribal dancers wearing brightly coloured dresses that swung softly in the air immediately caught my attention. Apart from their beautiful jewellery and garments and the exotic performance itself, their joyfulness was contagious. The beat of the drums had definitely caused the audience goose bumps. I also got the chance to watch a turban tying lesson. It's common to see men wearing one on their heads along with their long curly moustaches which have been old symbols of honour in Rajasthan.

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My experience in the desert was extremely significant because I was able to be in touch with a totally different culture and learn about their peculiar and unique lifestyle. Having had the opportunity of analysing what it is like to live in a tribal way, opened my sight to new horizons making it easier to realize how life can be lived in a simple but still pleasant way.