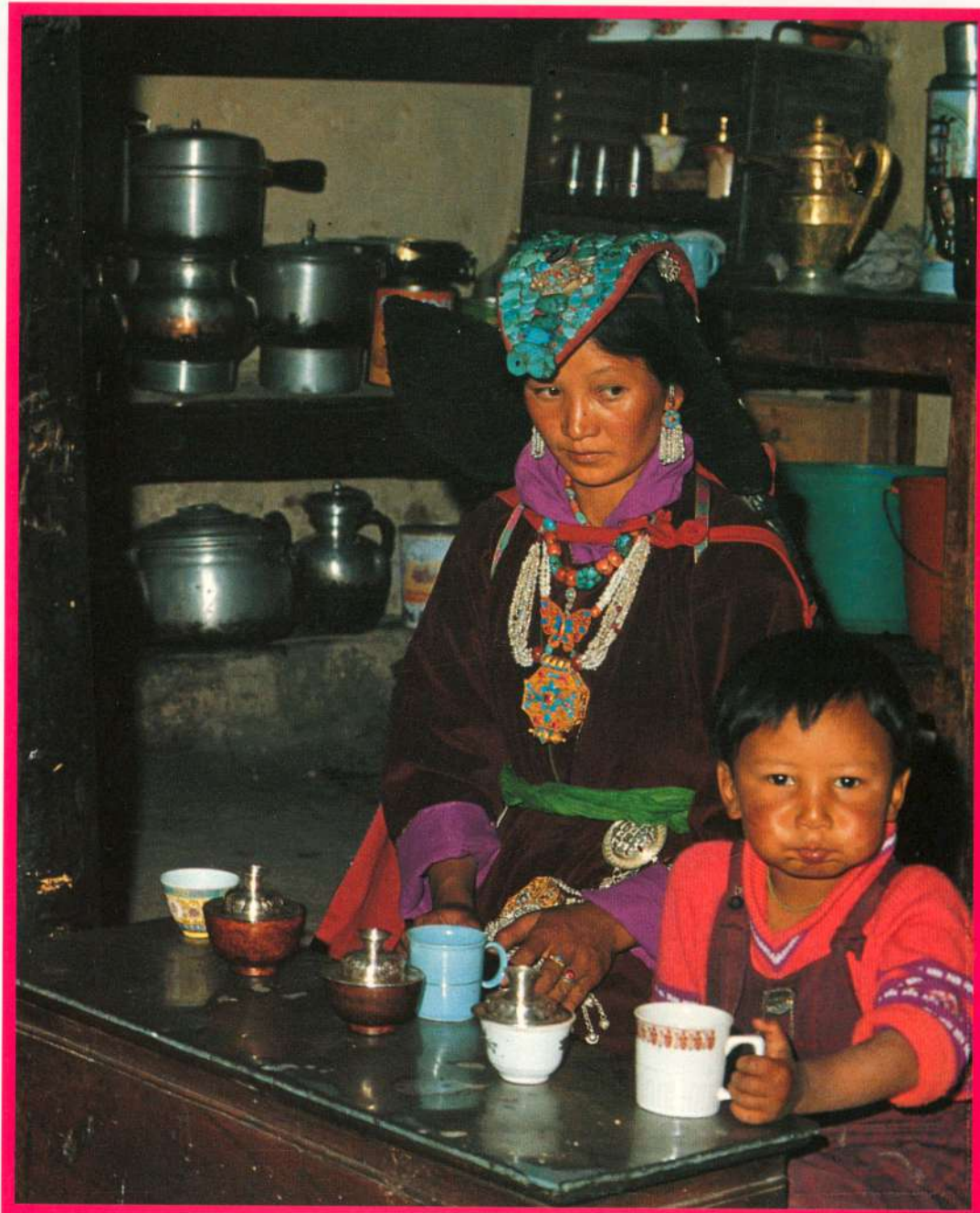


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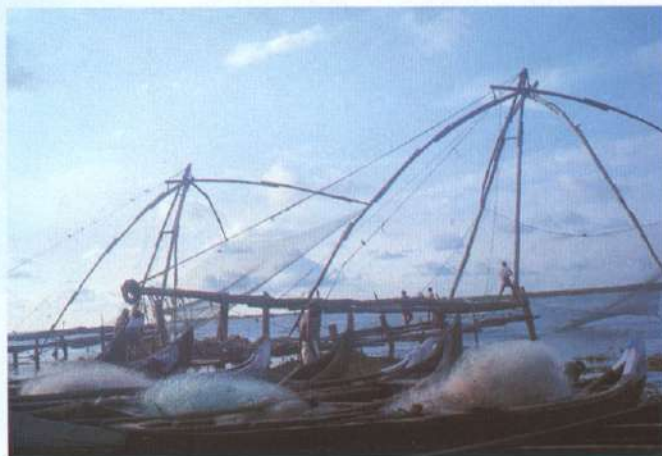
VOLUME 12, NO. 5 MAY 1999

C · O · N · T · E · N · T · S

*A traditional
Ladhaki kitchen
(P.K. De)*



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THE RURAL TASTE OF MARWAR



Text and Photographs:
Nihal Mathur

*The people of
Marwar are
robust vegetarian
people, well built
and healthy who
live off the land
— unpolluted by
pesticides and
artificial
fertilizers.*

The man came and placed a *bajra ki roti* (millet bread) on my *thali* (plate). It was thick and hard and looked as if it was made of cement. The prospect of dinner in the middle of the desert now really looked bleak. Soon the man returned to crush my *roti* (bread) with his bare hands. Having reduced it to smaller bits he poured dollops of *ghee* (clarified butter) into it. My driver urged me to add some crystals of coarse rock salt — which I did. The man returned again to pour some *khato* in it. Getting my cues from the driver, I dug into the food with all five fingers, making mouthfuls of nice little balls. Licking my fingers, I tucked in all of it and then asked for more. Eventually, it turned out to be a most memorable meal whose flavour lingered long enough for me to discover the rural taste of Marwar.

Comprising the western districts of Rajasthan, namely Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Barmer, Bikaner and Nagaur, Marwar constitutes part of the Thar desert.

This is a land of sand and grit with sparse vegetation. The annual rainfall is scant and temperatures vary from 49 degrees Celsius in summer to minus 2 degrees in winter. It is an inhospitable region of blazing sun and fierce dust storms.

Yet this arid land is inhabited by more than 12 million people, making Thar one of the most densely populated deserts in the world. Home to the Rathore and Bhatti Rajput warrior class of people, Marwar is also famous for the business communities of Jains, Oswals and Banias who are essentially city and town dwellers. In the countryside, however, there are several castes and tribes like the Raikas, Rabaris, Kalbelias, Bhils and Meghwals. But the predominant people of Marwar are the Rajputs, Jats and Bishnois who are pastoral and semi-agriculturalists, growing at least one crop during the brief rainy season while tending cattle throughout the year. Their food, as well as their economy revolves around the basic

desert cereal — millet as well as cow milk — and its many by products.

I was quite surprised to know that this desert land of Marwar was a milk surplus region that was well known for its cows! Not very long ago, it was said that in the remote regions of Marwar one could not get water to drink but there was always plenty of milk and buttermilk freely available to quench the thirst. The reason behind this miracle was *sewan* grass. "Usually referred as the King of Grasses, *sewan* or *Lasiurus indicus* has been identified as one of the most nutritious grasses in the arid world" said Dr. M.S. Yadav, Principal Scientist and a specialist on pasture grasses at the Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI) in Jodhpur. He added "Just one rainfall of 50 to 100 mm is enough for the *sewan* to grow luxuriously, converting desertscapes into vast grasslands.

Feeding in these pastures are Rathi, Tharparker and Nagauri breed of milch cows that are very adaptive to desert conditions. Capable of feeding on dry

fodder, they produce not record quantities but a quality of milk that is very high in its fat content. The milk of Marwar is famous for producing pure *ghee* that is distinctly granular and yellow in color with an irresistible aroma.

Over the years, I came to know that the *ghee* in Marwar is not seen as a medium for cooking food but is considered a basic food in itself. With practically no fresh vegetables, one could very happily eat his *bajra roti* (millet bread) with *ghee* and salt! In the world view of the people of Marwar, the *ghee* is essentially seen as medicine, a panacea for all illness and the amount of *ghee* one used spoke of the social status of the person. "Good health, in a sense, is measured by the quantities of *asli ghee* a person has consumed" said Jetha, my host in village Rama, somewhere between Barmer and Jaisalmer.

I got up early one morning to see his daughter-in-law churn yogurt in a large earthen pot. She stopped every now and then to scoop out fluffy

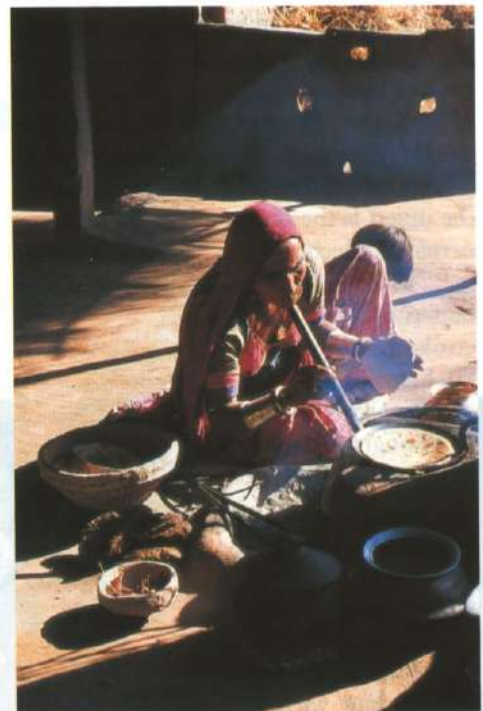
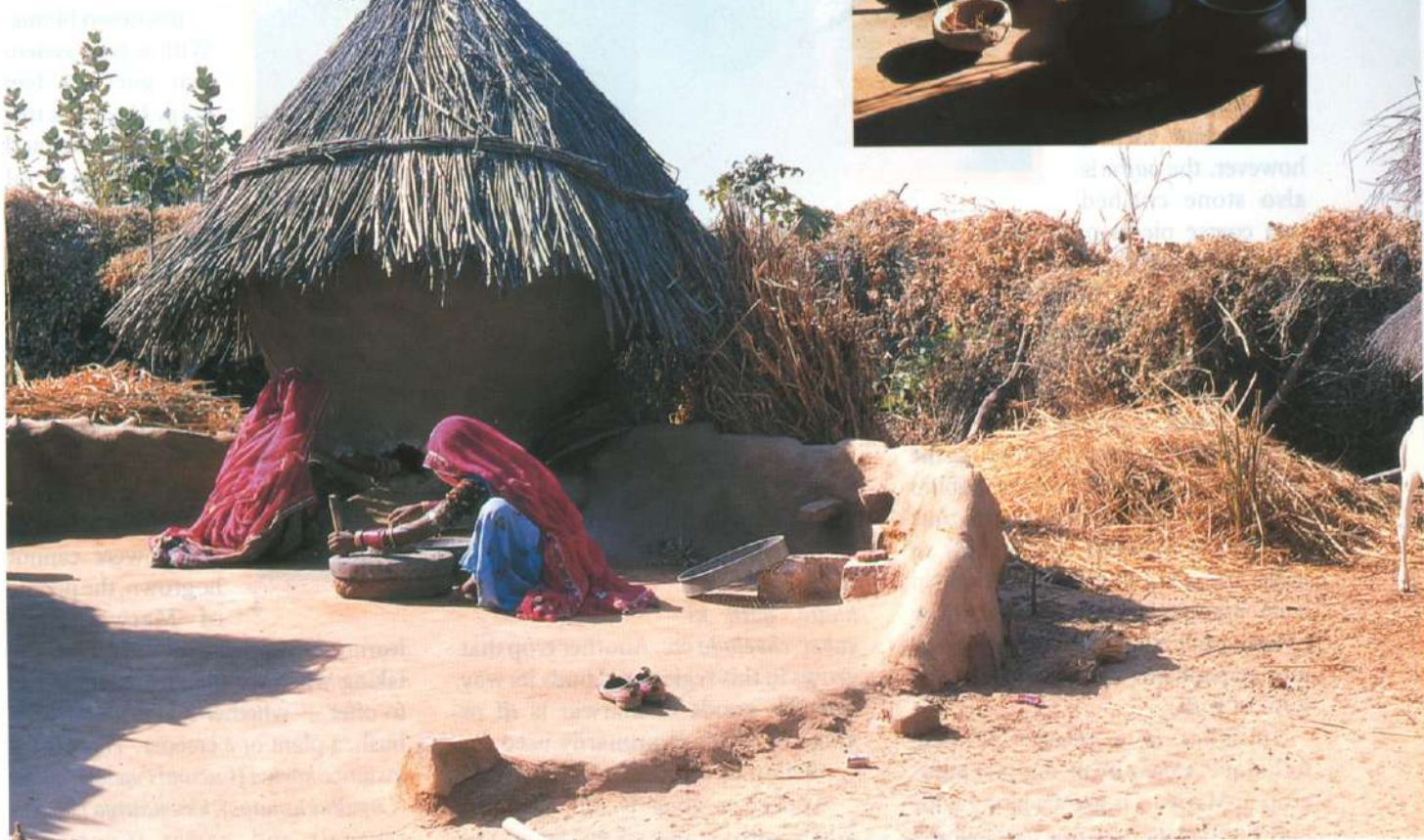
white butter from the pot into a brass container. Rubbing her 'buttery' hands all over her arms and face, like some sort of beauty treatment for the skin, she placed the butter container on cooking fire fueled by cow dung cakes. Slowly heated under low temperatures, the butter melted gradually, transforming into *ghee*, in a matter of several hours. Unlike rural Punjab which is known to consume 'loads' of white butter, the people in Marwar prefer the concentrated *ghee* instead.

Meanwhile, after removing the butter what had remained in the churning pot was *chaachh* or buttermilk which she emptied into another earthen container. Jetha poured me a large glass of salted buttermilk with a sprinkling of roasted cumin seeds. The many praises of *chaachh*'s nutritional and other qualities need no elaboration in this hot country, where it is more than just a refreshing cool drink. The buttermilk is as versatile an ingredient in desert diet as the *ghee* that is ingeniously used to

make several preparations. In Marwar it is mixed with millet or gram flour and is prepared into a wide range of dishes that are served at breakfast or meal times. And no meal in Marwar is complete without millet.

Millet is truly an amazing cereal that is nutritionally richer than wheat, corn, maize, barley, sorghum or rice. And yet it grows in the most arid of all conditions, requiring bare minimum water. With a low root system, millet is able to absorb even a very scanty rainfall and hence it is essentially a tropics crop that grows during the summer monsoon season. An expert on the subject, Dr. MBL Saxena, fondly

Facing page above: A whole range of dried vegetables Below: Millet is stored in cowdung plastered granaries Right: A Bishnoi woman hand rolls the millet roti and cooks it over cowdung fire



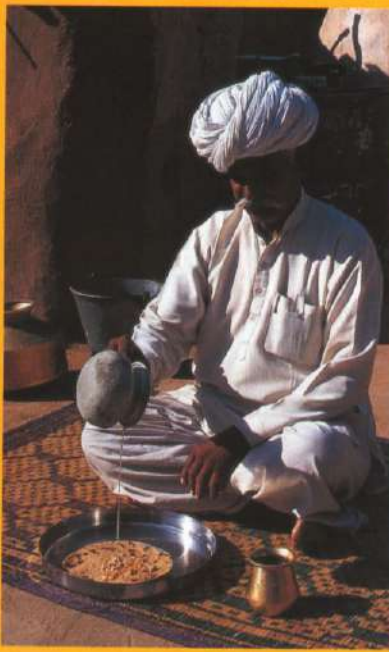
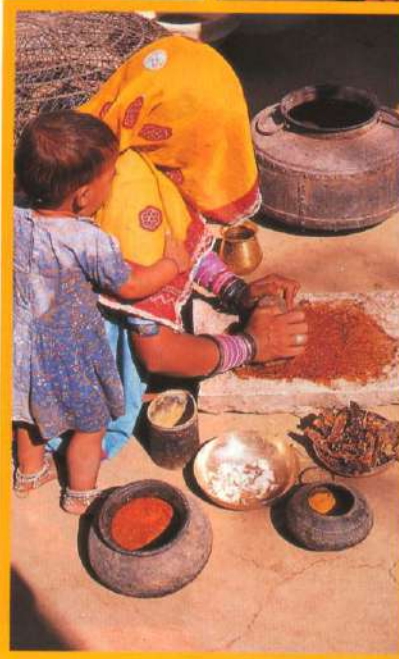
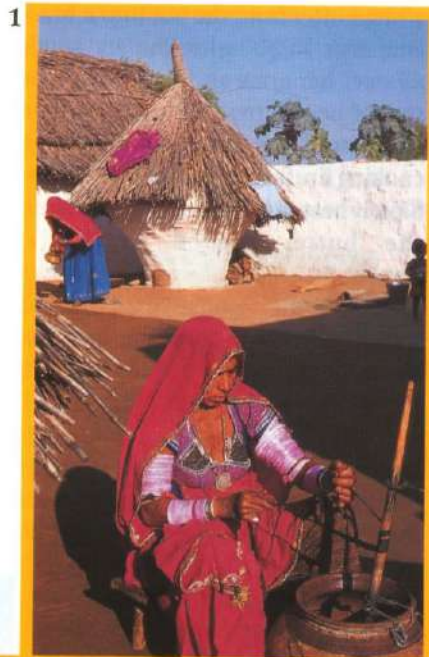
referred as 'Millet' Bihari Lal, told me that millet has the highest calorie value at 361 units, much above other cereals. It contains approximately 12% protein, 5% fats and 67.5% carbohydrates besides fibre, calcium and other minerals. Millet, undoubtedly is excellent for human constitution and digestion.

It is the women of Marwar that grind the millet into flour on hand rotated stone mills. Painstakingly powdered, the millet flour is then kneaded with water and hand rolled into small balls called *batties* or rounded and flattened into *roties* which are baked on fire. Colloquially called *sogra* the *bajra ki roti* constitutes the staple food of Marwar. But besides this basic food, the *bajra* is cooked into a variety of special dishes by the rural Marwari.

The classic dish of the desert is the *raab* or *rabri* in which millet is mixed with buttermilk and then cooked on dying kitchen fires in an earthen pot — usually all through the night! Normally eaten at breakfast, it is a preparation that can be done in different styles to suit changing seasons and individual tastes. For wholesome meals, however, the *bajra* is also stone crushed into coarse pieces or pounded by a wooden mallet into finer particles for making *kheech* or *kheechro* which is greatly relished with ghee, yogurt and jaggery.

Combining millet flour with that of cluster beans, a locally grown pulse called *mothi*, is very popular in the eating habits of the Marwaries. Behind this tradition lies basis of scientific fact — that the deficient amino acids of millet are balanced with those found in *moth*. Sprouted *moth* is a popular way of eating this lentil which is also made into papaddams and curried in the form of *badi*.

In what is a mixed farming technique, *moong* bean, another pulse crop in Marwar, is grown along with millet and *moth*. In some parts where



irrigated water conditions are available, wheat and gram is also grown. Rural Marwar has a definite taste for *besan* or gram flour which is used in making various dishes like *kadi* or *khato*, *gatte ki subzi*, *cheelada* etc. Another crop that grows in this region and finds its way into the goods of Marwar is *til* or gingerly which is primarily used for extraction of oil.

Cooked in gingerly oil, the *kair-sangri* curry is one of my favourites

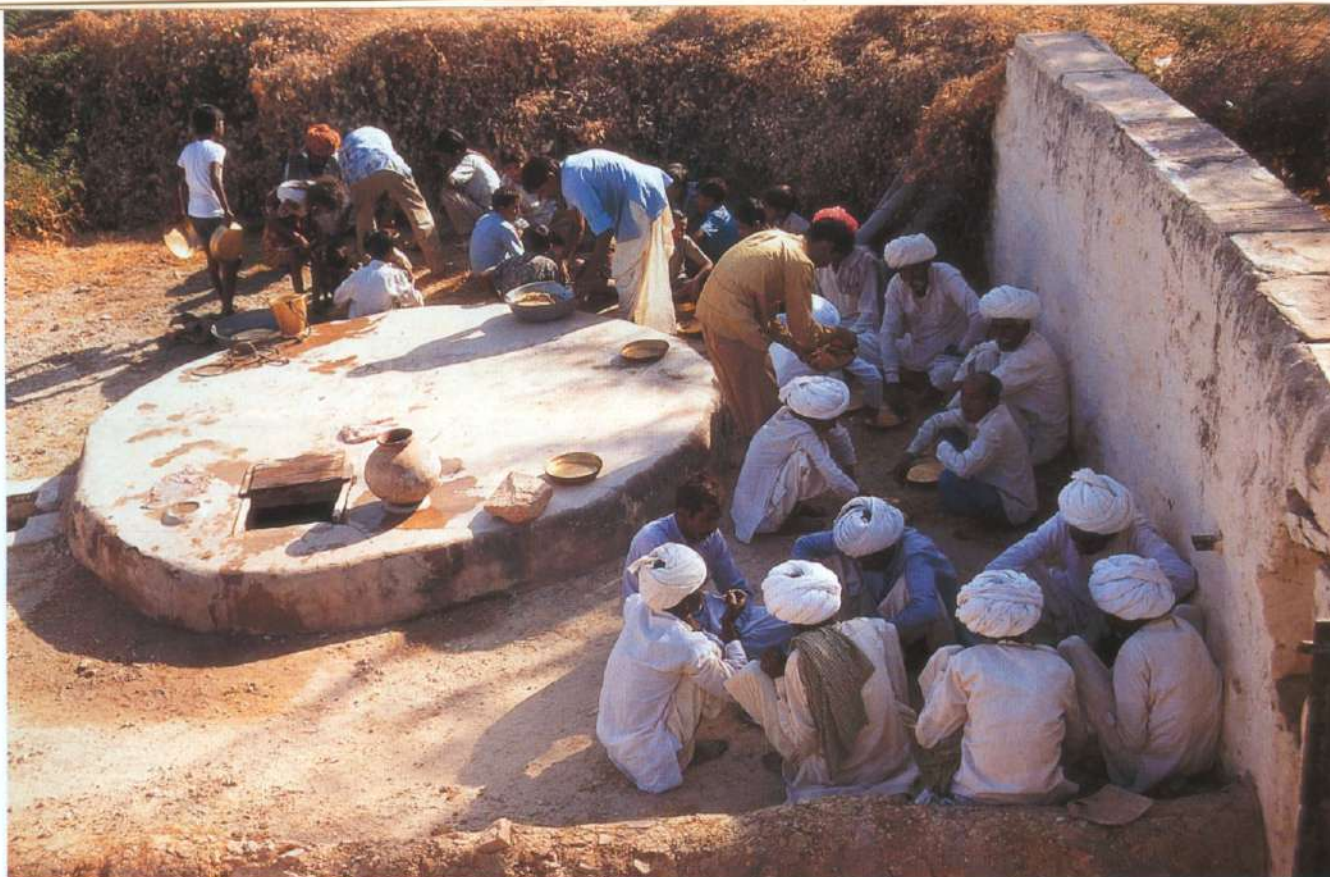
dishes from the desert. *Kair* (*Capparis decidua*) are small green berries that are fruits of a bush that sometimes grow into a very large thicket and in some cases, even takes the form of a tree! Although widely distributed across the Indian sub continent, *kair* is truly respected in Marwar where it's bitter berries are harvested for human consumption. Raw *kair* is treated by fermenting in salted water to make it palatable. Rich in minerals like calcium, phosphorus and iron, *kair* is also a small packet of protein and carbohydrates and is usually cooked as vegetable along with *sangri* - the leguminous fruit of the *khejri* (*Prosopis cinararia*).

Khejri is the most important tree of

this desert biome. With a root system that goes 70 feet deep, *khejri* is a tree that can withstand seven years of complete drought. In the heat of June and July it bears slender green pods called *sangri* that are plucked and cooked as vegetables as well as stored for later use.

In a land where simple vegetables like potatoes and cauliflowers cannot be grown, the people of Marwar have

learnt to supplement their food by taking whatever the environment has to offer — whether it is from a tree, a bush, a plant or a creeper. There is for instance *kachri* (*Cucumis melo*), *fofliya* (*Citrullus lanatus*), *khumattiya* (*Acacia senegal*) and *gawar* (*Cyamopsis*



Above: A festive fare being served to men in turbans and dhoties

- Captions: 1. Churning butter. The milk is set into yoghurt and then churned 2. A woman makes chilli chutney by grinding it on stone 3. A Bishnoi woman pouring ghee over a roti held out by her husband
4. Ghee is not merely a cooking medium but a basic food in itself. A Bishnoi farmer enjoying a hot millet roti

tetragonoloba) all of which are used as vegetables. Besides there are several types of melons and cucumbers that grow wild. And yes, they even collect that exotic commodity in the desert — the mushroom — which makes a rare and fleeting appearance in certain humid conditions. They eat them fresh as long as the season lasts and what they cannot consume, they store for future use, having perfected the art of drying them.

These dried vegetables are later turned into culinary delights by the genius of the rural Marwari who likes his curry just a little bit hot! Fresh green or dried red, chilli is an important ingredient in their dietary habits and without which, they simply cannot do. Part of the reason they consume enormous quantities of chillies is that they grow it. What is interesting is that chillies of Marwar are considered comparatively 'sweeter' than others like the fiery ones from Andhra Pradesh. Rich in Vitamin C and A when fresh, the rural Marwari eats it in a variety of ways — making snacks, curries, pickles and of course, chutney which I simply adore.

Chutneys is a subject in itself in Marwar. You can have all kinds of them, made in equally different kind of

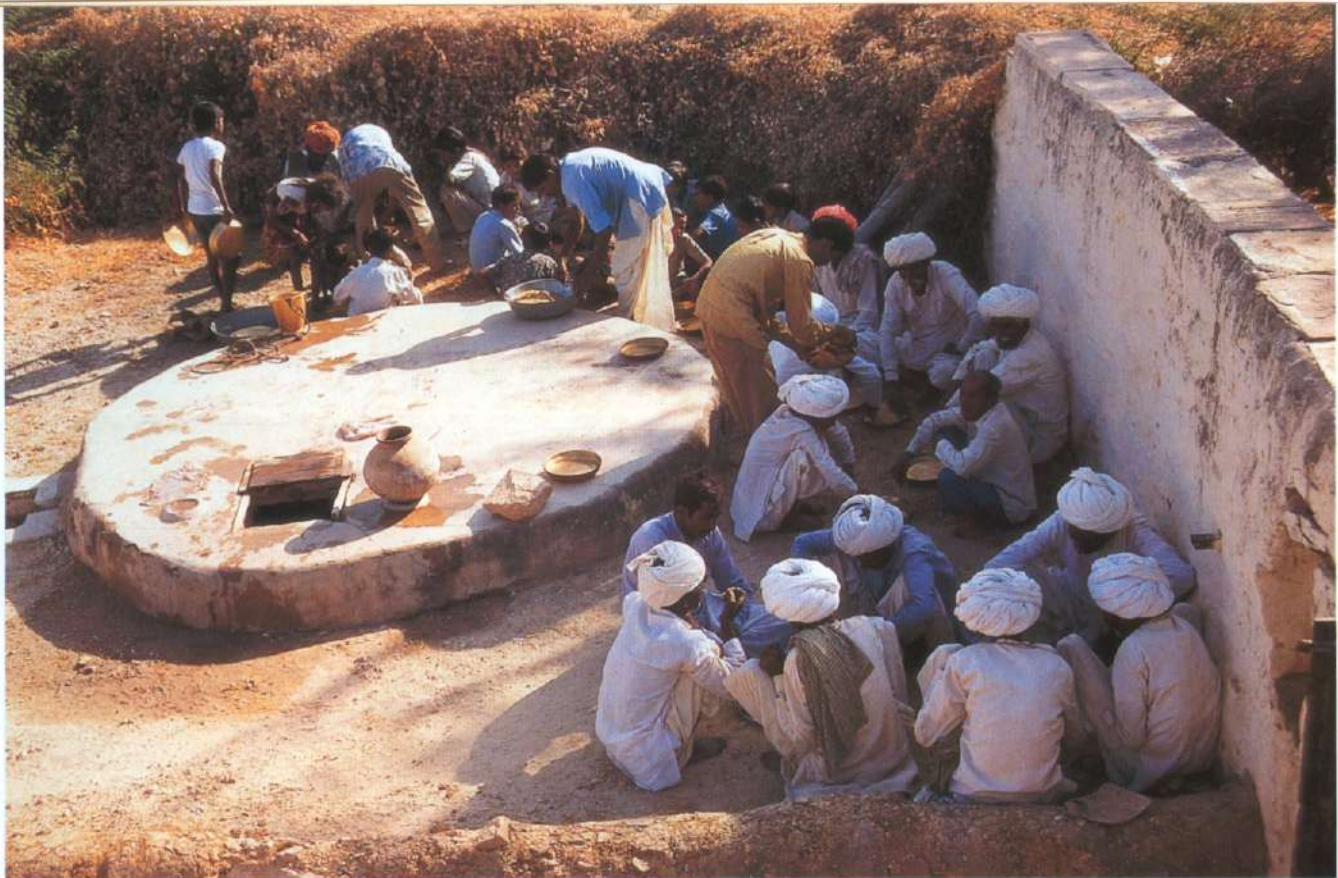
ways. But the ones that are more popular are of garlic, onion, *kachri* and of course chillies. The secret of making a great red chilli chutney, I was told by my friend Ramdev in a village near Bikaner, is to grind it so finely on stone that it releases all its cellular capsicin — the element that sets one on fire. Once the chilli paste has become as smooth as "cream", it is then cooked in oil which kills the capsicin and takes away the sting. Besides adding salt to taste, one could also put in some garlic, onions or *kachri* which acts as a souring agent in a land where tomatoes are hard to come by. Special mention must be made of the *panch kuta* pickle which is intrinsic to Marwar and consists of *kair*, *sangri*, *kumta*, *kachri* and *amchoor* or slices of dried unripe mango.

Clearly, "salty" and "sour" are the dominant flavours of rural Marwar where "sweet" takes a low priority. This is natural for a land that imports all its sugar and jaggery. Consequently, there were very few traditional sweet dishes that I could count on my finger tips — like the *lapsi* and *seera* which were made of wheat, *moong ki daal ka halwa* and of course *laddos* and *chakki* made of *besan*. There were few other items as well but they were reserved for a special occasion — a feast or as

they would say it in Marwari a *jeeman*.

Although uninvited, I recall going to a *jeeman* in the company of an acquaintance to the house of Bhujji Ram in the Guda Bishnoi village, not far from Jodhpur. More than six hundred people of the Bishnoi community had gathered together for the day long celebrations that marked the 12th day of the passing away of Bhujji's aged father. In enormous *kadais* (woks) the *halwais* had made several dishes to feed the people. While the women sat in a separate enclosure with children, the men sat in neat rows for the midday *jeeman* that consisted of fried *poories* and *gatte ki subzi*, *kadi* and *kichidi* made of rice and gram. And yes, there were two sweets *nukti* and *lapsi*. It was a fine gathering of beautiful women in colorful clothes and tall and rugged men in sparkling white turbans and dhoties (unstitched garments).

Even though the bounty of the desert was frugal, it was indeed of rich food value as pointed out by my dear friend Mahendra who said "The harsh environment concentrates the nutrients of the soil in whatever it produces. That is why Marwar supports such a handsome and hardy race of cultured people.



Above: A festive fare being served to men in turbans and dhoties

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