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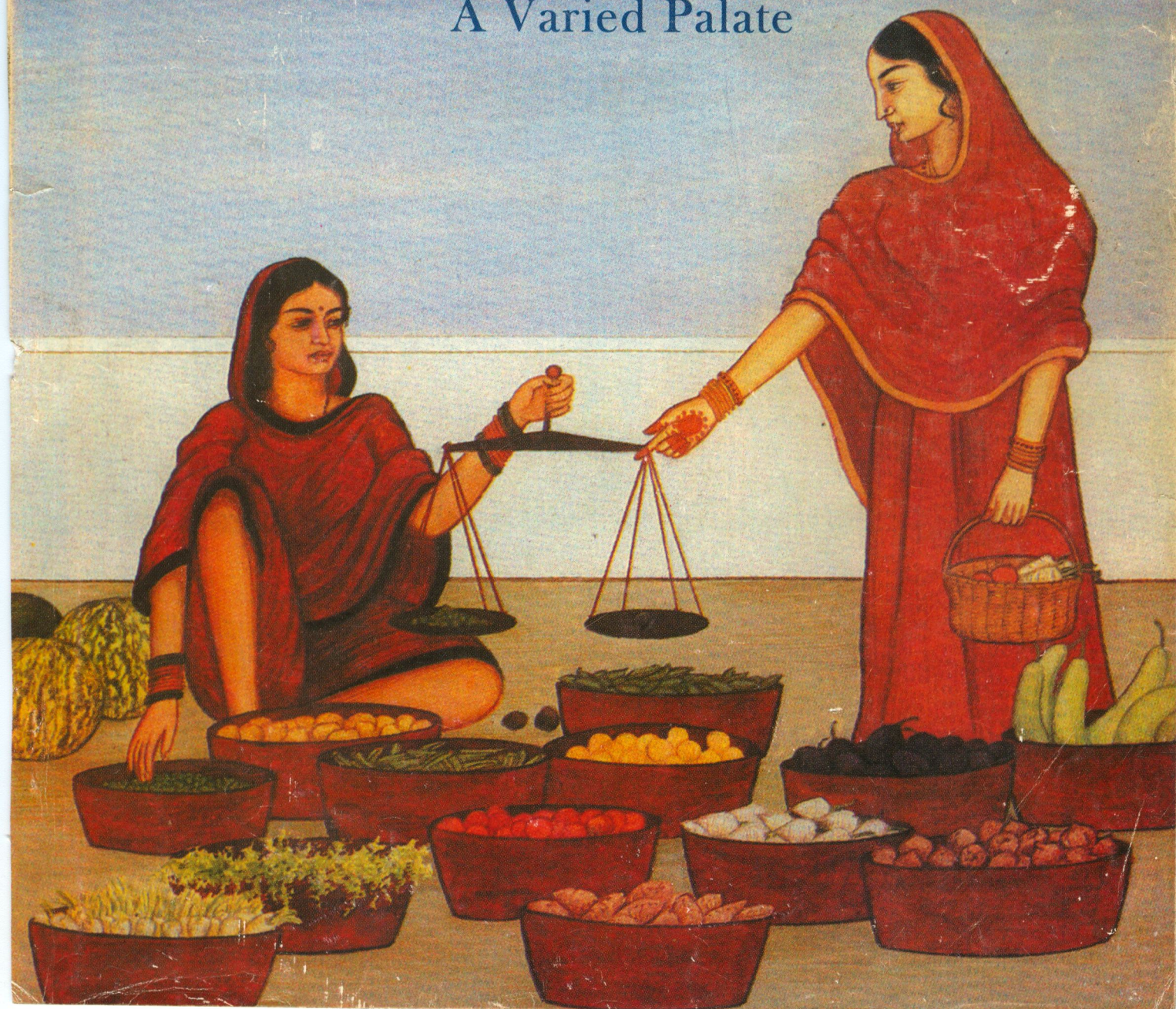
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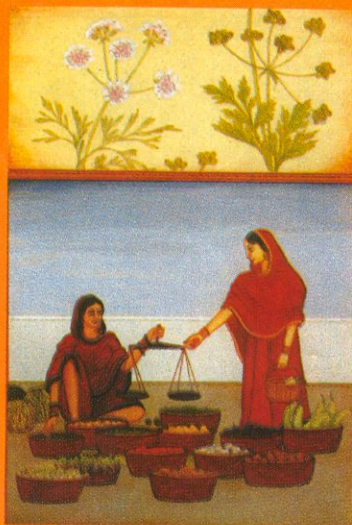
INDIA: A Varied Palate



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Cover illustration from
'The Garden of Life'
by Naveen Patnaik

India: A Varied Palate

Food For The Road 9

Travelling titillates the tastebuds — amply demonstrated by the fact that most of us seem to acquire enormous appetites when we are on the road. Railways have their own special culinary associations as do roads with their numerous dhabas and markets, while shikar has its own parameters as far as eating goes. Here we chronicle the charms of eating on the road

Imperial Traditions 35

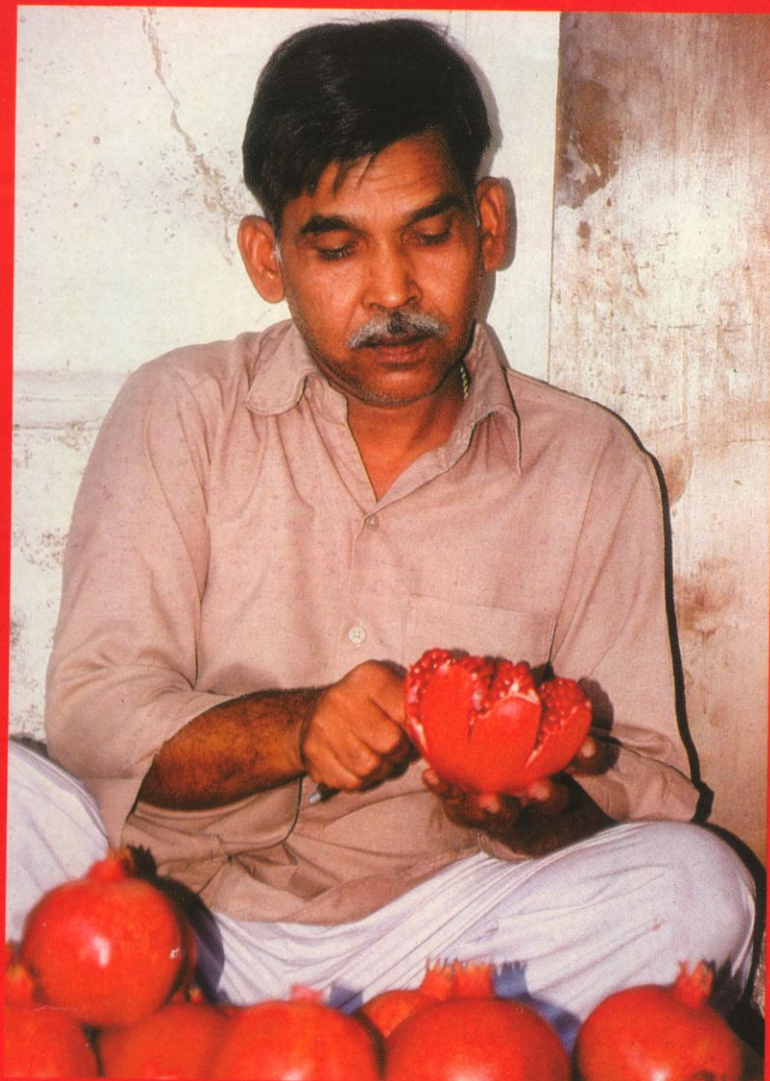
Gastronomy as an art form inevitably reaches new heights under imperial patronage. We travel to far away Uzbekistan to taste the flavours of a fragrant valley. We then see variations of this cuisine in Avadh and Hyderabad where local flavours have been assimilated to create unique culinary delights.

Regional Variations: Plain and Festive Fare 81

India boasts of many different cuisines, as distinct as the people who live there. From the harsh western desert of the Thar where we sample typical Marwari food, to the lush vegetation of Bengal where we partake of a Bengali lunch. We learn more about the diet of widows and boatmen in Bengal and then move further east to Assam and Meghalaya. Then its off to sunny, joyous Goa for an anniversary party and for ceremonial feasts in Kerala. We round off with a selection of sweets from all over India

Eating Out... 169

To eat out — for some, a necessity; for others, a pleasurable occasion. Whatever the mood, most Indian metros have a plethora of eating places and here we catalogue some of the exciting ones in Bombay and Delhi



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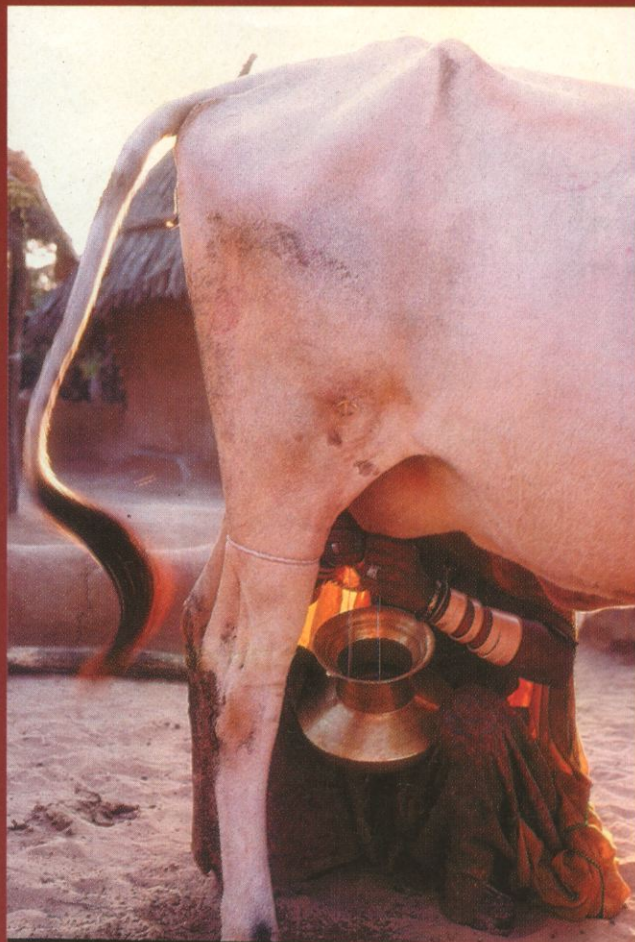
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Of Millet And Milk:

The Rural Food of Marwar



FOR THE ROBUST PEOPLE OF MARWAR, BAJRA KI ROTI GARNISHED WITH DOLLOPS OF FRESH GHEE AND SALT AND WASHED DOWN WITH REFRESHING BUTTERMILK, EPITOMISES A SIMPLE BUT HEALTHY MEAL. NIHAL MATHUR DISCOVERS THE VERSATILITY OF MILLET AND MILK

*LEFT: Millet being used to prepare special dishes for the jeeman, a ceremonial feast to mark weddings and birth or death anniversaries. The entire village is invited and food is cooked in enormous iron vessels.
ABOVE: Marwari woman milking indigenous (desi) species of cow. Milk from this region is famous for its high fat content*



Marwar is home to the Rathore and Bhatti Rajput warrior class of people as well as the business communities of Jains, Oswals and Banias who are essentially city and town dwellers. The countryside is inhabited by several castes and tribes like the Raikas, Rebaries, Kalbelias, Bhils and Meghwals. However, the predominant peoples of Marwar are the Rajputs, Jats and Bishnois who are pastoral and semi agriculturists and tend cattle throughout the year. During the brief rainy season, when the desert blooms, they also cultivate at least one crop. Their food, as well as their economy revolves around the basic desert cereal, millet and cow's milk and its many by-products.

I was quite surprised to learn that the Marwar desert is a land abundant in milk and well known for its cows. It was once said that in the more remote areas of Marwar, it was difficult to find water to drink yet there was always plenty of milk and buttermilk to quench one's thirst. The reason for this phenomenon is sewan grass. As Dr MS Yadav, principal scientist and specialist on pasture grasses, at Jodhpur's Central Arid Zone Research Institute (CAZRI) said: 'Sewan or *Lasiurus indicus* has been identified as one of the most nutritious grasses in the arid world, which is why it is commonly referred to as the King of Grasses. Just one rainfall of 50 to 100 mm is sufficient for the sewan to grow luxuriously, converting desertscapes into vast grasslands'.

The Rathi, Tharparker and Nagauri breed of milch cows who graze in these pastures are very adaptable to desert conditions and

ABOVE: A woman grinding millet in a hand rotated stone mill.

NEXT PAGE: A Jat home in Benad village. The wife is making sogras or bajra ki roti on an earthen stove. She serves her husband these rotis with liberal dollops of ghee

The man came and placed a bajra ki roti in my thali. 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 looked really bleak. Soon he returned and with his bare hands crushed my roti into smaller pieces. I watched while he poured dollops of ghee over the crushed roti. My driver urged me to add some crystals of coarse rock salt. Again, the man returned only to pour some khato over the mixture. Imitating my driver, I dug into the food, making little balls for each mouthful. I wiped my thali clean and, licking my fingers, I asked for more. This simple fare turned out to be

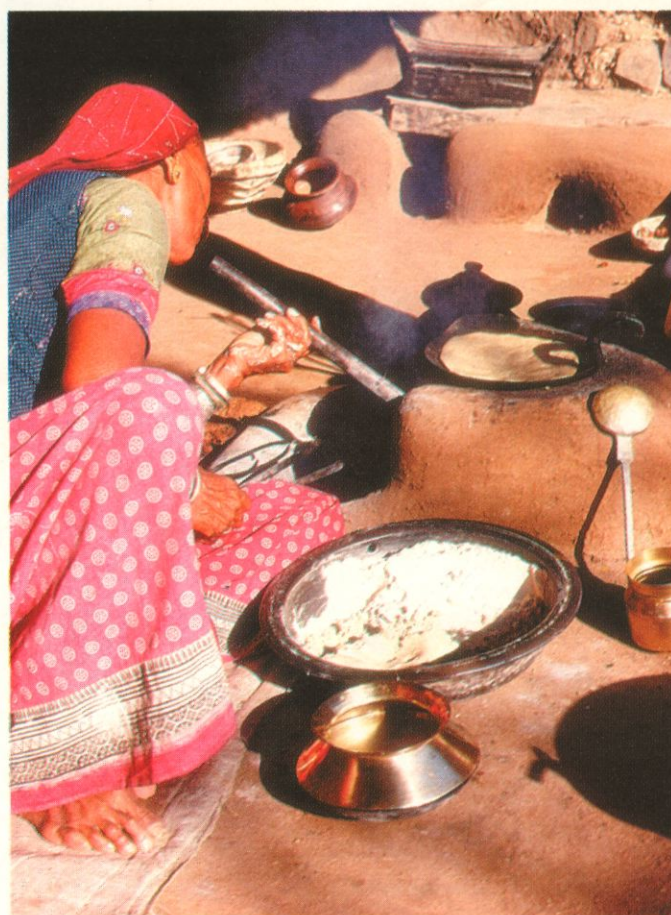
a memorable meal, the flavours of which lingered long enough for me to discover and appreciate the rural cuisine of Marwar.

Marwar, comprising the western districts of Rajasthan — Jodhpur, Jaisalmer, Barmer, Bikaner and Nagaur — constitutes part of the Thar desert. This is a land of sand and grit with sparse vegetation, fierce duststorms and blazing sunshine. The rainfall is scanty and temperatures vary from 49 degrees Celsius in summer to minus 2 degrees in winter. Yet, this arid, inhospitable land is inhabited by more than twelve million people, making the Thar, one of the most densely populated deserts of the world.



thrive on feeds of dry fodder. The milk they yield is not in large quantities but the quality is very high in its fat content. The milk of Marwar is famous for producing pure ghee that is distinctly granular and yellow in colour with an irresistible aroma.

Over the years I discovered that in Marwar, ghee is important not only for the flavour it adds to the local cuisine but also for the quantities used which indicate a person's social status. Ghee is not used as a cooking medium but is instead considered a basic food since with practically no fresh vegetables, a man can happily eat and enjoy his bajra ki roti with ghee and salt. It is also considered a panacea for all illnesses. As Jetha, my host in village Rama located somewhere between Barmer and Jaisalmer, stressed 'Good health in some sense is measured according to the quantities of asli ghee a person consumes'. Thus, the people of Marwar prefer





concentrated ghee unlike the rural Punjabi who consumes vast quantities of white butter.

Early one morning, I woke up early to watch Jetha's daughter-in-law churn butter in a large earthen pot. She would stop every now and then to scoop out soft, fluffy, white butter from the pot and place it in a brass container. Then, rubbing her buttery hands over her face and arms like some sort of beauty treatment, she placed the container of butter on a fire fuelled by cowdung cakes. Several hours later, the butter heated slowly over low temperatures melted gradually into ghee.

After removing the butter, the chaachh or buttermilk remained in the pot. She emptied this into another earthen container. Jetha poured me a large glass of salted buttermilk sprinkled with roasted jeera or cumin seeds. It was delicious. But chaachh is not just a refreshing nutritious drink appropriate for this hot land. In Marwar, it is considered as versatile an ingredient in the desert diet as ghee. Chaachh mixed with millet or gram flour is ingeniously used to prepare a wide range of dishes that are served at breakfast or other meal times.

No meal in Marwar is complete without millet or bajra. This truly amazing cereal is more nutritious than wheat, corn, maize, barley, sorghum or rice. Yet it can grow in the most arid conditions, with very little water. Its root system allows it to absorb whatever moisture the scanty rainfall provides, making it essentially a tropical crop cultivated during the monsoon. Dr MBL Saxena, who is fondly called Millet Bihari Lal, told me that among all cereals, millet has the highest calorie value, containing approximately 12 percent protein, 5 percent fat and 67.5 percent carbohydrates besides fibre, calcium and other minerals. Millet, undoubtedly is

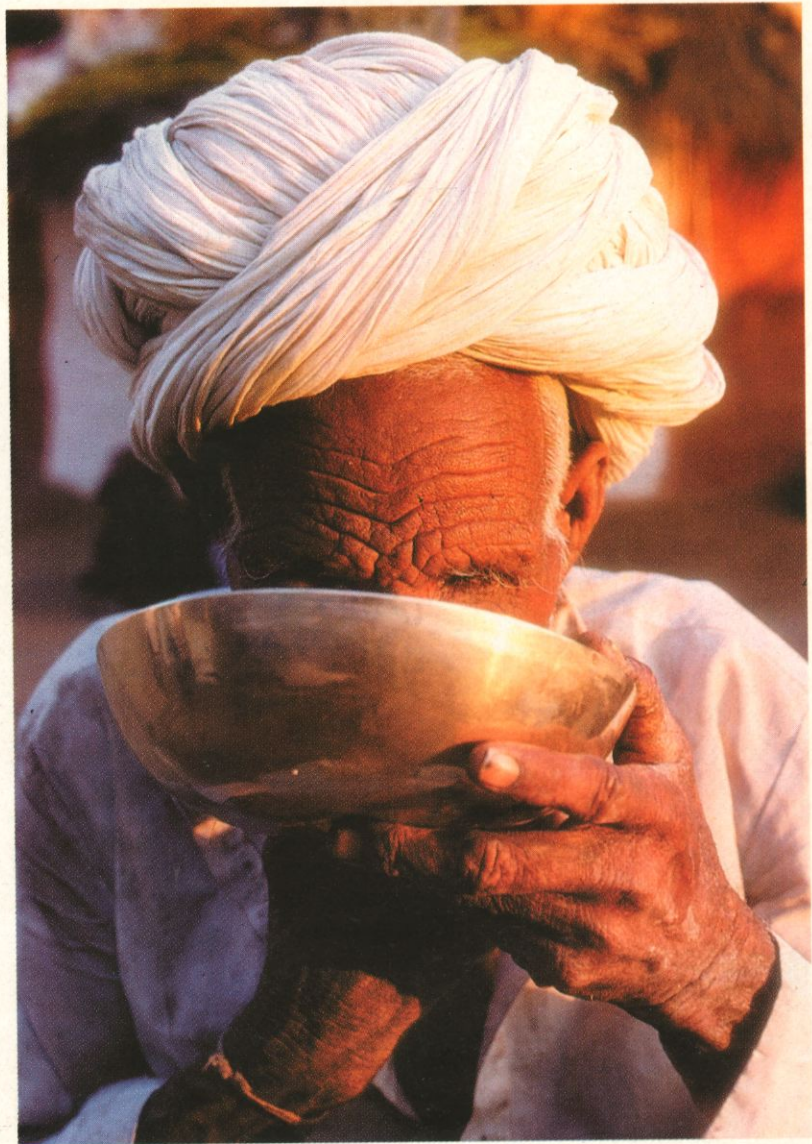
excellent for the human constitution and for digestion.

The women of Marwar painstakingly grind the millet into flour on stone mills rotated by hand. This powdered flour is then kneaded with water and either rolled into small balls called batties or rounded and flattened into rotis which are baked over the fire. This bajra ki roti,

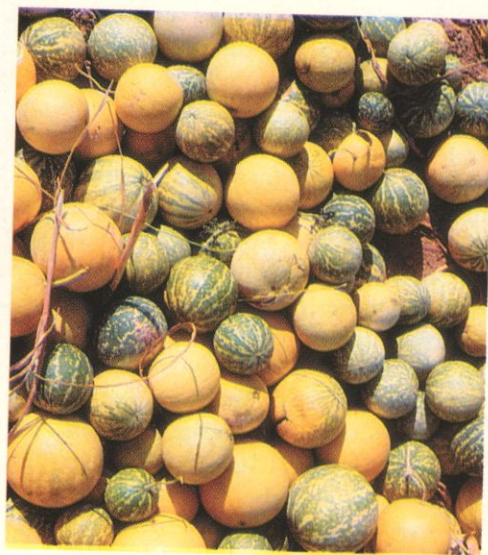
colloquially called sogra, constitutes the staple food of Marwar.

The rural Marwari uses bajra to make a variety of special dishes. For wholesome meals, bajra is stone crushed or pounded with a

LEFT: *Jat woman churning butter.*
ABOVE: *Koja Ram, a Jat, drinking raab, made of millet flour and buttermilk from a metal bowl called bhatka*



Chaachh mixed with millet or gram flour is ingeniously used to prepare a wide range of dishes that are served at breakfast or other meal times.

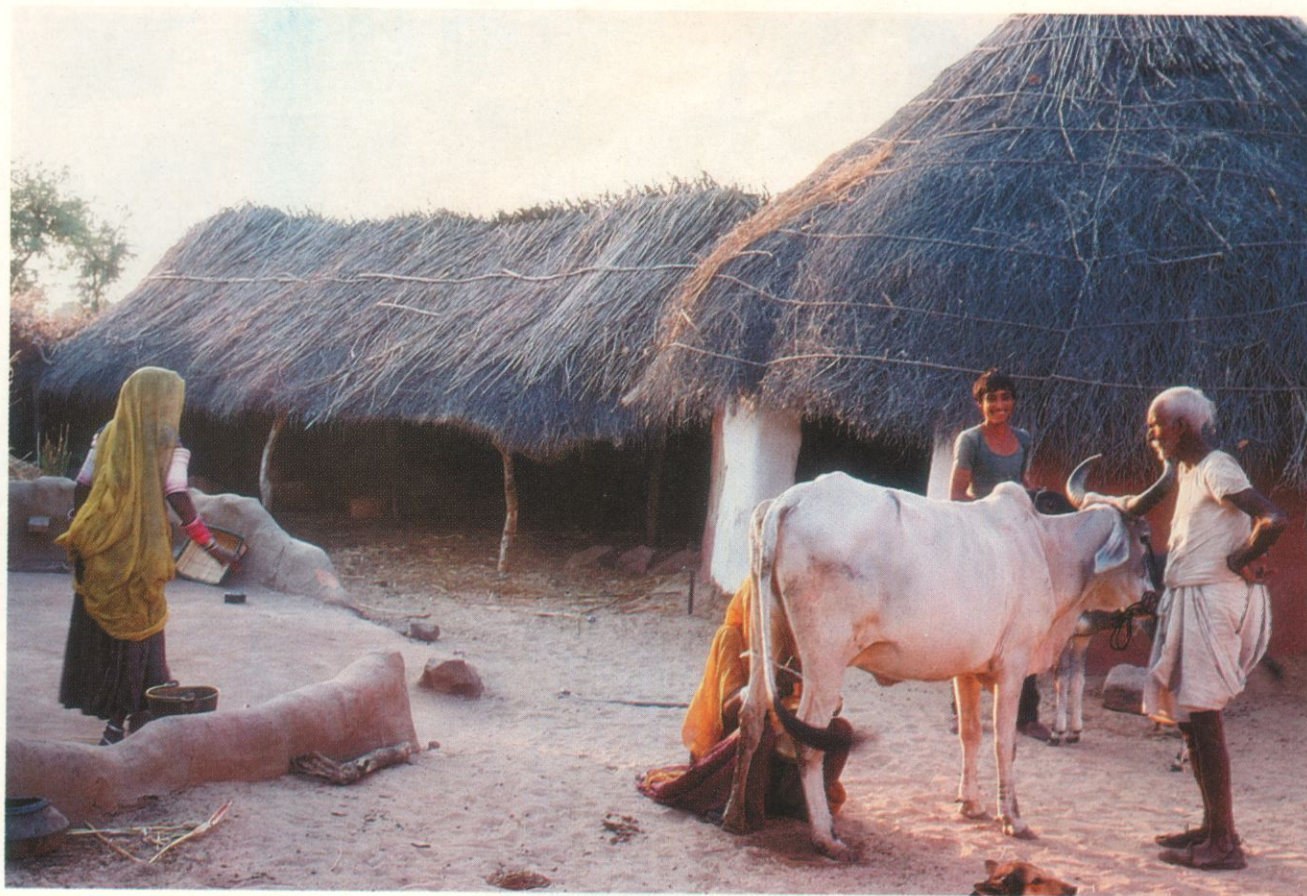


wooden mallet into finer particles to make kheech or kheechro which is greatly relished when accompanied by ghee, yogurt and jaggery. Bajra mixed with buttermilk in an earthen pot and cooked over dying embers all through the night results in that classic desert dish, raab or rabri, which is eaten for

breakfast the next morning. This combination can be prepared in different ways to suit changing seasons and individual tastes.

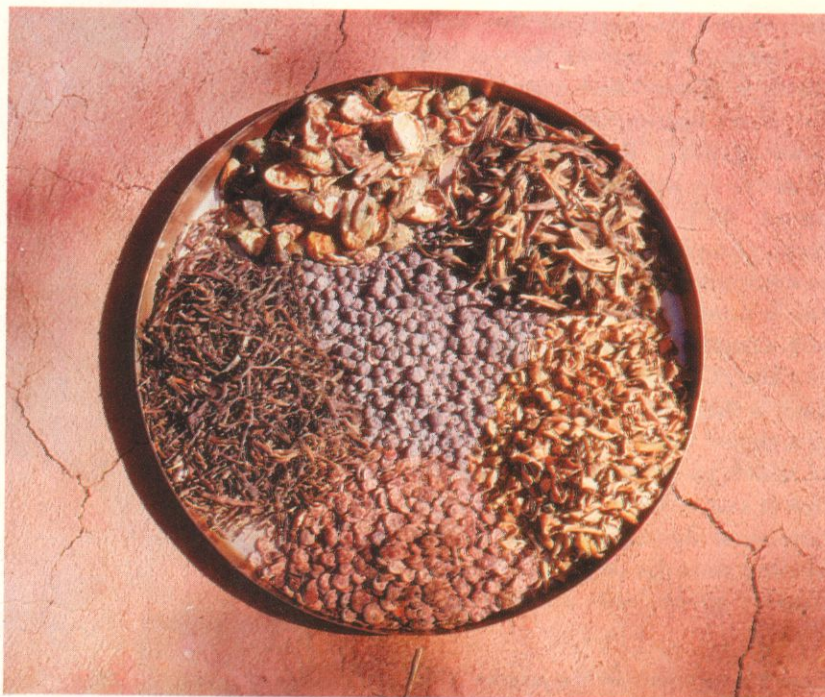
Millet flour combined with cluster beans, a locally grown pulse called moth, is another popular dish which can also be interpreted

TOP: In December, the crop of chillies is harvested and spread out to dry under the desert sun. During this time for miles around, one can see the ground turn red. Here, a man turns the chillies over for them to dry evenly.
BOTTOM LEFT: A Jat woman grinds a fiery red chilli chutney.
RIGHT: Harvest of bitter melons. The seeds have medicinal uses.



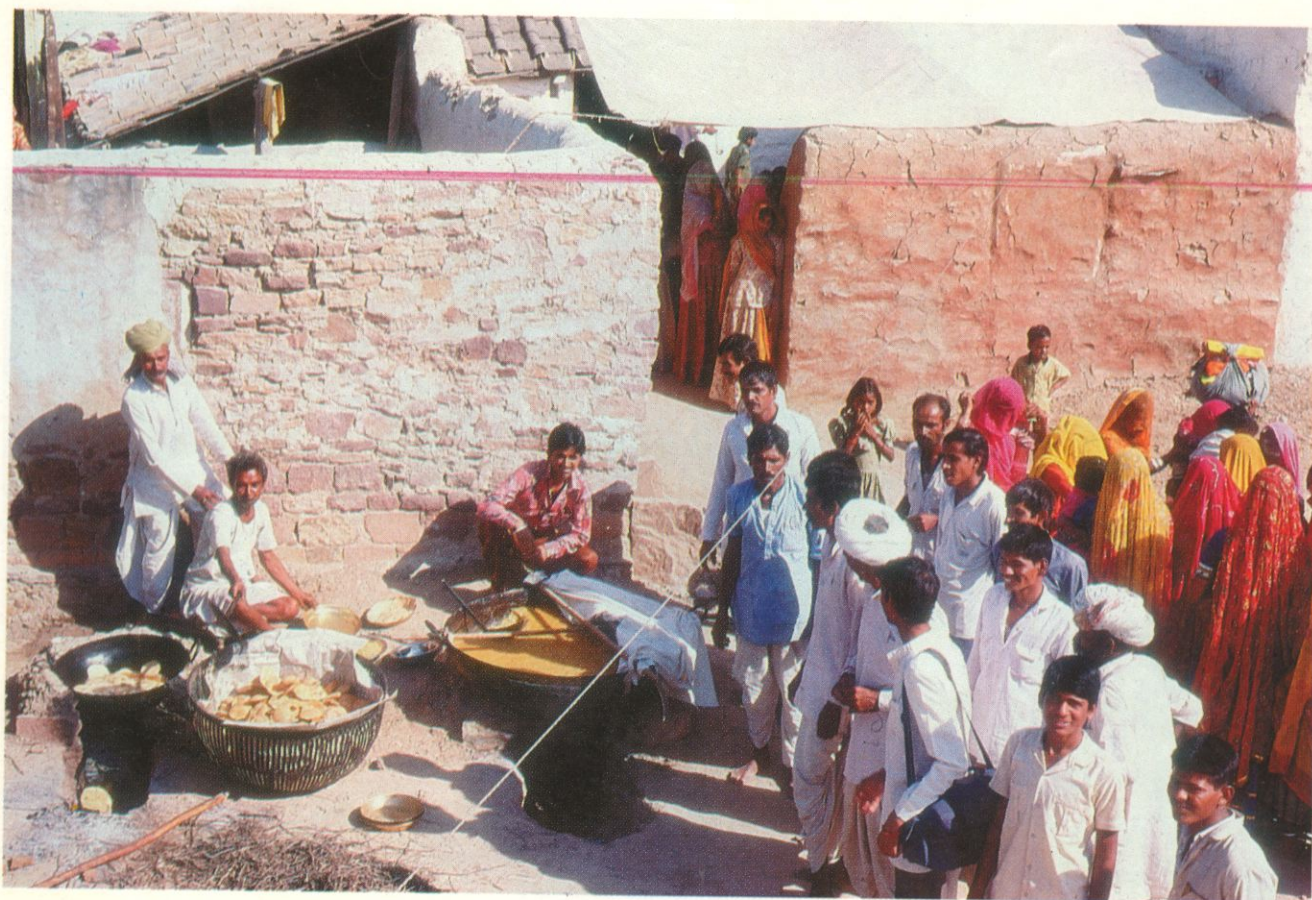
scientifically — moth balances the amino acid deficiency in millet. Sprouted moth is eaten in great quantities and is also made into papaddams or curried in the form of badi. Adopting the mixed farming technique, moong, another pulse crop, is grown along with millet and moth. In some areas, which are fortunate enough to be irrigated, wheat and gram are also cultivated. Rural Marwaris have a definite taste for besan or gram flour which is used to make various dishes like kadi or khato, gatte ki sabzi and cheelada.

Til or gingelly, used primarily to extract oil, is another crop that grows here and finds its way into the foods of Marwar. Kair-sangri curry cooked in tilli ka tel or gingelly oil, is one of my favourite dishes from the desert. Kair (*Capparis decidua*) are small green berries that appear on shrubs that sometimes grow into large thickets or even trees. Although widely



TOP: At sundown, the cows return from grazing in the desert pastures and are milked by the women. Community cowherds take hundreds of cows out to graze and bring them back to their owners.

BOTTOM: Dried vegetables of the desert on a thali. In the middle, kair, sangri on top of it, and then clockwise, kachri, gawar, tinda and khummatiya



distributed throughout the sub-continent, it is only in Marwar this shrub is treated with respect and the bitter berries harvested for the cooking pot. Raw kair is made palatable by fermenting it in salted water. Rich in minerals like calcium, phosphorus and iron, as well as some protein and carbohydrates, kair is usually cooked as a vegetable with sangri, the leguminous fruit of the khejri (*Prosopis cinararia*) tree. This is the most important tree in this desert biome, the root system of which go seventy feet deep, so that it can withstand seven years of complete drought. During the blazing months of June and July, slender green pods called sangri



TOP: Preparations for the jeeman. The halwai is making poories, and in the next kadai, one can see seera, a traditional sweet dish made of wheat.

BOTTOM: A closeup of seera.

NEXT PAGE: A guest at the jeeman with a thali of the special dishes, poories, gatte ki subji, kadi and seera

appear which are plucked and cooked as vegetables or stored for later use.

In a land where ordinary vegetables like potatoes and cauliflowers cannot be grown, the people of Marwar have learnt to supplement their diet by using whatever the environment has to offer, be it from a tree, a bush, a plant or a creeper. For instance, kachri (*Cucumis melo*), fofliya (*Citrullus lanatus*), khumattiya (*Acacia senegal*) and gawar (*Cyamopsis tetragonoloba*) are all regarded as vegetables. Besides, several types of melons and cucumbers grow wild. The people even gather that exotic commodity of the desert — the mushroom — which makes a rare and fleeting appearance under some humid conditions. Mushrooms are eaten fresh as long as the season lasts and the remainders stored for future use.

These robust desert people have also perfected the skill of drying vegetables. Dried vegetables are later transformed into culinary delights by the enterprising Marwari who likes his curry just a wee bit pungent. Thus fresh green chillies (rich in vitamin C and A) or dry red ones are integral to their diet and are made into snacks, curries, pickles and chutneys. One reason why they consume enormous quantities of chillies is because they grow them. Interestingly, the chillies of Marwar are considered sweeter than their fiery counterparts from Andhra Pradesh.

Chutneys are a complete subject by themselves in Marwar. There are many kinds, each made differently though the most popular are those made with garlic, onion, kachri and of course, chillies. My friend Ramdev from a village near Bikaner, confidentially told me that the secret of making a red chilli chutney was to grind it very finely on a stone to release all the cellular

capsaicin, its fiery element. Once the chilli paste becomes as smooth as cream, it is cooked in oil which kills the capsaicin and removes the sting. Besides adding salt to taste, some garlic, onions or kachri, which acts as a souring agent in a land deprived of tomatoes, can be used to enhance the flavour. Panch kuta, a pickle intrinsic to Marwar consists of kair, sangri kumta, kachri and amchoor or slices of dried raw mango.

Clearly, the dominant flavours of rural Marwar are sour and salty. Sweets have a low priority natural in a land that imports all its sugar and rice and gram as well as two sweets, jaggery. Consequently, the few nutki and lapsi.

In Marwar, ghee is important not only to add flavour to the local cuisine but the quantities used also indicate a person's social status.

sweet dishes that exist can be counted on one's fingers — lapsi and seera which are made of wheat, moong dal ki halwa and laddos and chakki made of besan. For special occasions like a feast or jeeman as they call it in Marwari, some sweets are made. I recall attending a jeeman with Bishnois who had gathered together for a day long celebration on the twelfth day after an elder's death. Colourfully clad women and children were grouped in a separate enclosure while the tall, rugged men in sparkling white turbans and dhotis sat in neat rows. Halwais were cooked for the mid-day meal in enormous kadais. There was fried poories and gatte ki sabji, kadi and kichdi made of

These are a robust people, well built and healthy, who have lived off a land, unpolluted by pesticides and artificial fertilisers. Though the bounty of the desert is frugal, it is indeed rich in food value and, as my friend Mahendra pointed out, this harsh environment concentrates the nutrients of the soil in whatever it produces, which is why Marwar has spawned such a handsome and hardy race 🌱

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY NIHAL MATHUR

