

RECOLLECTIONS OF DESERT RHYTHMS

(A photo-essay on Jodhpur and Jaisalmer)

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Stepping off the warmth of the maroon compartment of the Indian Railway, the early morning chill on the platform drained off the last remaining winks of slumber. The familiar yellow board at the end of the platform read `Jodhpur`. Finally I had arrived to the destination of my memories of forts, havelis, deserts and warriors.

After taking directions over a cup of tea I took an auto rickshaw to the clock tower (*ghantaghar*). The clock read 7.00 and the medieval market around the clocktower had yet come to life. Walking along the paved `Sardar market`, past its doorway with engraved letters, I crossed houses painted blue, STD booths; past people soaking palms over burning embers; past children hurrying to schools, criss-crossed the narrow lanes and checked into the Haveli Guest House but not before missing a few turns.

My stomach empty since last night growled. `breakfast` – I hungrily whispered to myself and climbed the steep steps to the roof top restaurant of this tidy guest house. There, before me at a distance, the Mehrangarh fort rose impressively above a cluster of houses. Its turrets and the bastions bathed in the golden glow of the morning sun stood out to the supremacy of the ancient warriors. The state flag atop the fort wall furled furiously in the morning breeze. After filling myself, I decided to walk uphill to the fort entrance, the `Jayapol gate`. Feeling like a warrior I began exploring the majestic grandeur, except that this warrior had loaded cameras instead of swords and spears.

The original fort was built by Maharaja Rao Jodha in 1459, when he shifted his capital to Jodhpur from the nearby Mandore (about 9 kms from Jodhpur and now a public garden). The palace built within the fort is impressive in its carvings and latticed windows. The fort walls built of the local `chitar` stone, show scars of cannon ball hits during the enemy invasions. The palace, within the fort houses a public museum and some of the impressive chambers worth visiting are the *Moti Mahal* (pearl palace), *Phool mahal* (flower palace), and *Sheesh Mahal* (glass palace). On display are a collection of palanquins, elephant howdas, costumes, weaponry, furniture and musical instruments. As one moves across the palace beautiful vistas open up of the town below, the endless brown expanse with houses standing out in blue. Along the bastions of the fort, local musicians play the Indian spirit to the visitors in exchange for some money. The colorful cholis, the twirling ghagras, the ornate jewelled women with covered veils are worthy of photography.

At the foothills of the Mehrangarh, the old town is a densely scattered cluster of houses, hardly rising over two storeys. The meandering streets with open drains are wide enough for pedestrians but hardly allow couple of crossing cows cross each other. Each winding lane reveals a colorful palette, blue houses and red costumes being dominant. Houses are built of local stone dressed into blocks and stacked brick like one on top of the other. The walls are then plastered with lime and painted blue which works as an insect repellent. The blue, the color of the sky also represents the brahman, the ever expansive.

Cont 2

Exploring more, the Jaswant Thada, a memorial of Maharaja Jaswant Singh II built in white marble and sandstone displays rare portraits of past rulers. Close by, the clock tower market bustles with hectic activity both with local buyers and visitors. The shops lining the market and the approach (*Nai sarak*) are famous for `Mojadis` (footwear), handloom and handicrafts. The

quilted bedcovers of Jodhpur are famous all over the world.

The Umaid Bhawan Palace, an architectural splendor in art-deco was built between 1929 & 1942 as a famine relief project to give employment to famine affected people of this parched area. Built by Maharaj Umaid Singh, today the palace is a luxury hotel. A part of the palace is converted into a museum, open to public, displaying rare and exquisite collection of tableware, furniture, and clocks. The present day dynastic ruler of Jodhpur resides in the upper quarters of this palace.

That evening, saw me perched on my now favourite location- the roof top restaurant of Haveli guest house. The days activity were slowly coming to an end. Women were moving along the terraces, collecting sun dried spices and clothes back into bundles. The sun had set behind the Mehrangarh, enveloping it into twilight darkness. My tiredness drained off with the second glassful of tea. The sodium lamps around the fort were lit and slowly the Mehrangarh came back to life. The recessed windows silhouetted black against the golden glow and the turrets formed deep etches along the fort walls. Around me cameras clicked, the view worthy of lifetime memories.

The warrior in me felt the satisfaction of achievement and of conquest. That night I was off on another mission, another fort and another sunset, to the golden city of Jaisalmer.

It was pitch dark when I exited the station at 5.30 that morning. In the far distance was the golden fort of Jaisalmer, like a shimmering dream within the cobalt dawn, perched vantagefully on a low hill and brightly lit by the sodium lamps. All along the way there were hints of preparation for the three day desert festival to commence today.

..... *The camel trotted with Hanif nudging him to hurry. On his way past me he greeted 'salaam'. I returned his greetings & followed him to the ground where camels were being adorned.....* Colorful tail knots, embroidered saddles, anklet braces, & carved canopies transformed these furred animals to handsome creatures for the day. The inaugural procession started with the sun at its peak, at Gopa chowk at the entrance to the fort. Little girls in *ghagra-cholis* took lead followed by the flamboyant Border security force and the local Rajputs in their traditional best. Soon to join the procession were the locals showing off their ethnic preference of costume and music. A moving kaleidoscope, the procession moved towards the Poonam stadium, where the swelled crowd awaited their local heroes.

Cont 3

The events followed enacting the colorful history of the past. Little girls and boys playing the famous love-pair of Moomal-Mahendra of days gone by, looked impressive with tattooed moustaches, and ornate jewelry. The dais was kept busy throughout till late evening with activities, the popular ones being the Mr. Desert contest and the longest moustache. The following day the fun-filled activities began with camel races and camel polo, played between the BSF and the 'Royal Rajputs', a one hour display of few hits and lot of misses, with the BSF retaining the trophy. The last day the festival took off at the Sam, the beautiful sand dunes about 40 km from Jaisalmer. An impressive show was put on with paratroopers landing on the golden sands.

In contrast to the frenzy of the festival, the town of Jaisalmer moves at a slow pace, entirely based on tourism. In the bygone days, the town was an important trade route, which brought Jaisalmer great wealth, evident in the intricately carved havelis of the trade merchants. The fort (also called the Sonar killa) was built in 1156 by Rawal Jaiswal and crowns the 80 m high *trikuta* hill. Unlike the Mehrangarh at Jodhpur, the Jaisalmer fort has houses, smaller havelis and restaurants built within it. The Jain temples approached through the narrow lanes are architectural marvels. The only way to experience the local spirit is to meander within these lanes on foot, to see children playing on otas; cows moving from door to door anticipating a handful of rice; speeding and

rumbling scooters; and elderly women basking in the morning sun. Outside the fort, some of the havelis worth visiting are the *Patwon-ki-haveli* and *Nathmal haveli*. The *Gadisar Lake*, a source of water to the town is at a walkable distance. The lake is surrounded by doorways and temples built in the local stone plentifully abound with cooing pigeons.

The experience of the past three days is beyond wordy descriptions. With the traces of the past relived, the warrior returned home, triumphant; with memories and memoirs to ever preserve, a speck of the golden sand of Jaisalmer lingered in the trouser pocket.

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