



Chapter 4

Chambal – Watering down dacoits

Brij Mohan Gujjar and I squat in the shade of a stunted desi babul, dodging three-inch long thorns. It's a hot afternoon in Karauli ki Dang a little north of the Chambal River. The tree provides a minimal amount of shade. In the heat and dust, Brij Mohan tells his tale.

“I am a reformed dacoit. In the eight years that I practiced dacoity, I murdered, kidnapped and extorted from people in the Chambal ravines.

“I became a dacoit with my brother to avenge our father's murder. When I was seven, and brother Bhagwan Singh was 11, people who we considered our neighbours and friends came and killed him. They said, ‘Sign your land over to us’ but my father refused and they killed him.”

The setting sun turns a darker shade of orange, dyeing the red earth underfoot nearly crimson. The muddy green checked headgear that Brij Mohan has on, to help balance heavy loads, becomes brownish in the orange light. His white cotton vest, also muddy from the day's work in the field, and checked cotton lungi, acquire the lowering sun's hue. His eyes seem to glow redder and the black moustache bristles. He has a white stubble beard, black moustache and hair. The moustache is impressive – it arches away from his face like the horns of a wildebeest. He follows my gaze.

“Yes, I had a big moustache. It was bigger than this and straight. What else was there to do as a dacoit save twirl my moustache. The size was in keeping with my status in the gang. All dacoits have moustaches. It helps pass the time – twirling is a threatening gesture and makes us feel we have dressed for the day. The twirling also kept the moustache in shape without the need for any wax or oil. A dacoit was always known by the moustache he kept. If he wasn't worth his whiskers, his sardar would have him chop them. But now, in civilian life, I have reduced this to less menacing proportions.”

Brij Mohan's was a land-owning family from the village of Rajpur in the Sawai Madhopur district of southern Rajasthan. Sawai Madhopur is better known for the Ranthambhore wildlife sanctuary than its dacoits but these ‘tigers’ are more a fact of life for the locals than their striped counterparts. The Gujjars were traditionally herdsmen of the region and migrated from place to place in search of greener pastures for their cattle. They made money selling milk and tending the cattle of others. Over the centuries, their lives became more settled and they acquired land and became agrarian. Land led to disputes, like the one which killed his father.

“My brother and I became dacoits 12 years after my father was killed. We were small then. We had to learn to use the gun and become strong men before we could endure the hardships of being a dacoit.”

Hardships? After a life of twirling moustaches? No horse-mounted cavalry charges for the Chambal's dacoits. It was a hard life of tramping miles on foot through sandy ravines to extract



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money or execute a contract killing. Unlike the dacoits of Hindi films, where they gallop in and out of villages and take what they want at will, the real life of a dacoit is hard.

“The money was good, which compensated for the hardship. I used to make up to a 100,000 a month at times. But I never saved a penny.”

Ill-gotten gains benefit no-one.

“We avenged my father's death and fled into the ravines. We joined a gang of men led by Jagdish. For eight years, I led a life on the run.

“One day, we had camped near a stream in a heavily wooded area. We were bathing. Suddenly a scout shouted ‘Police’ and then we were attacked. We had to pick up whatever we could and run. The gunfight lasted the entire morning but we made our getaway.”

Brij Mohan smiles at the memory. His paan-stained teeth also seem to glow orange in the light of the setting sun. Is it cold, or is it just me, I wonder. The summer evening isn't cold by any yardstick, but with the sun down, its noticeably cooler. The Dangs aren't what you would call typical dacoit country. There is little forest cover despite deep ravines so men would find it hard to hide during the day when they could be observed from a height. Across the Chambal river, though, it's a different story. The Madhya Pradesh portion of the ravines are more forested.

“We would cross the Chambal in rubber tubes after an operation. If we had done the operation in Madhya Pradesh, we would cross into Rajasthan till heat was off. On the other hand, if the hit was in Rajasthan, we would go across to Madhya Pradesh. We preferred MP because the forests are denser there and policing lax.

“I did not murder anybody except my father's killers. The rest of the time, I spent in extortion, dacoity and kidnapping. The mine owners of Dholpur, known for red sandstone, were our primary targets. We also picked up the relatively rich farmers in the region and small businessmen. But other gang members did kill people for money.”

The gang varied in size from 10 to 15 men for the eight years Brij Mohan was part of it. When Jagdish died in a police encounter, a man called Pritam Singh took over. He surrendered to the police and Maharaj Singh became the sardar. Brij Mohan decided he had had enough of a life on the run during Maharaj Singh's tenure.

Brij Mohan takes me and my two companions down a path. We reach a row of trees and the path abruptly dips and descends steeply to the valley floor. It's a narrow path, the passage made more difficult by the sand and loose rocks on the way. I pick my way down carefully, weighed down as I am by camera equipment, so as not to land on my backside.

Across the valley is a 10 metre high mud wall.

It spans a nallah some 25 metres across with a sandy bottom. Scrub trees on both sides break the sandy monotony. The sides of the ravine have more trees than usual, anchoring the sand and



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stabilizing the slopes. The mud wall is actually a check dam to stop rainwater from running off into the rivers, deepening the ravines in the process. It is part of a system of checkdams that Brij Mohan has worked to erect across some ravines near his Rajpur village. A group of men and women transfer stones to each other to build a low stone wall on one side of the wall. The side that will eventually face the onslaught of water has a stone face.

“This is what I do now,” says Brij Mohan. “Conserving water.”

“I left the gang and surrendered to the police. There was an amnesty scheme under which I served a couple of years in jail. The police dropped charges against me in exchange for my surrender.”

Brij Mohan joined the ranks of hundreds of surrendered dacoits.

“I thought, ‘I have achieved my goal as a dacoit to avenge my father’s death. Why fall to a police bullet when I can return to my former life’. I approached the station house officer of the local thana in Rajasthan and gave myself up.”

This reason for joining a giroh, or dacoit gang, has made it easier for those working for the surrender of dacoits to get them to return to a normal life. It is honour or revenge that drives the men and women of the region into the ravines. In an interview to The Tribune, Dr. S. N. Subba Rao, founder of the National Youth project of India, says, “Once I had figured out that it is not money or the lack of it that made a person take to weapons but revenge for an injustice done, I knew what had to be done to convince them to come back to the mainstream. For example, there was this 16-year-old boy, Khunta, one of the youngest of the lot. He told me that ever since he was five, his mother had ingrained into him that he had to avenge his father’s death. The day when he was strong enough to hold a gun, he shot the man dead and joined a giroh. But we were able to bring him back.”

Dr. Rao has been the man behind the surrender of nearly 670 dacoits between 1960 and 1976. He recalls, “It was a historical moment when in 1972, 189 dacoits surrendered before Jayaprakash Narayan at Mahatma Gandhi Seva Ashram, Chambal, which I had established with the help of some volunteers in 1970. I worked with the help of Tehsildar Singh, Man Singh’s son.”

But water seemed to have softened Brij Mohan’s heart. He is now a family man, with around 20 bighas of land behind his house and another 30 or so downstream of the checkdam. His checkdam.

There are other checkdams upstream of this one, but Brij Mohan took the lead to get this one constructed.

“Most of the farmland owned by Rajpur’s villagers is downstream of this checkdam. We have always had a water problem – too much during the monsoons and too little at other times. The checkdam will even out the availability of water and let us grow more than one crop,” he says.



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He has seen how this works elsewhere. The underground water table is low so tubewells don't work well. Handpumps in his village dry up every summer. So the idea is to catch rainwater before it runs off into the rivers and make it stand – standing water percolates to the water table. Therefore the checkdam.

The villagers toiling at the site look up at him. Brij Mohan pulls an olive shirt with epaulettes – totally undecorated as if to mark the uneventful life he led in the ravines. Were he to change from the coloured lungi to a pathani pyjama of the same colour, he would look like he had just walked in from the hunt. The man has presence. At 5 feet 10 inches and 80 kilos, head topped with black hair streaked with a little white, he looks much younger than his 40 years. His arms are hairy and powerful; I can well imagine them gripping and using the crude double barrel guns that some of the dacoits still prefer. Most, he assures me, use advanced weapons including AK 47s, though some have the older shotguns and rifles. He personally preferred rifles because they were easier to handle.

The man is easily the leader of the group of around 20 working on the checkdam. He sits on his haunches and directs the others, occasionally lending a hand to lift a heavy stone to a labourer's head. Stones fly and the wall rises slowly. The wall forms the downstream face of the checkdam. When full, it will hold water for several months.

Brij Mohan says, "I motivated the villagers to build this dam. Our farmlands are downstream of this. We have some wells to irrigate the fields but they run dry soon after the rains. The soil is sandy and does not hold rainwater. When this is complete, our wells will have water longer so we can grow a proper crop, maybe even two. We will also have more water to drink. Already, the checkdam upstream of this one has brought up water tables in the region. It's good to be a labourer again."

It's a help to the women folk as well. They had to walk six or seven KM for water; the older checkdam has reduced that to three KM and this one will reduce it to less than one.

"Giving water is the highest form of service," he philosophizes.

I ask, "So what made you, a man who spilt blood, into a man who saved water?"

This story begins in a village some distance away, Rawatpura, from where his wife comes. After he got out of jail, Brij Mohan married and became a farming man. The family has a fair bit of land and he did well growing rice, wheat, mustard, millets and gram. He bought himself a tractor that was used for carting construction material, when not ploughing fields. Brij Mohan made ends more than meet.

An organization was helping people at Rawatpura reclaim ravines by soil and water conservation. They needed equipment and labourers, both rare in a region where there is little activity other than subsistence farming. The only other activity in the Dangs is sandstone mining.

"I offered my tractor and labourers to the organization for their work at a daily rate of Rs. 750 plus diesel," he says, solemnly. "That was three years ago. It was the start of a long involvement



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with water. I used to be an angry man then. My eyes used to be red and my moustache, hennaed and long. I looked every bit the dacoit that I wasn't. It was a reminder to everybody about what I had been."

My guide in the Dangs, Karan Singh, nudges me at this point. He has been a mute listener, nodding in agreement with all Brij Mohan has said.

"Actually, he demanded that we use his tractor. He said, 'If you need men and equipment, you have to take them from me and nobody else'. So we agreed even though his rate was higher than the Rs. 500 that others were willing to provide tractors for. But we wanted the cooperation of the entire village and saw this man could ensure it."

This, during a lull in the story when Brij Mohan is called away by the construction workers for a bit of advice. Wheels within wheels.

He returns to his story. "They were making a tank for the village to collect rainwater so that instead of running off into rivers, the water could be used for irrigation. It was also the revival of an old system that we had here for irrigation that had fallen into disuse as men migrated to towns for work. I thought this was something good that I should try and do in my village."

Brij Mohan spoke with this village Panchayat and persuaded them to construct the older checkdam in 2003. It has worked wonders for water in the area. The region is noticeably greener than other parts of the Dangs. In the ravine, trees are taller and there is some grass – better for the Gujjars' cattle. Now, they have a second checkdam to store more water for crops. This one, though, will work indirectly – the stored water will recharge the wells in the fields that will be used for irrigation and drinking water.

Tanks here are called talais. Those in fields are called khet talais. A majority of tanks are made in fields or common lands. Nearly all are used for irrigation, drinking water and watering animals. Wild animals also quench their thirst at these oases. The land is dry but stunted trees indicate that water is available a few feet down. This is what handpumps exploit in the region. But we shall return to talais later.

We turn for Brij Mohan's village. I walk along the bottom of the checkdam while he, Karan and Sunil Sharma, my companions, walk along the top. Flanking Brij Mohan, the threesome could well have emerged from the ravines that very minute. He makes an imposing figure, in contrast with the relatively shriveled physiques of my two companions. Against the setting sun, it's a great photo-op. We scramble up the bank and the inevitable happens – I slip and slide backwards on my butt. The camera is safe thankfully inside two bags but not my dignity. Brij Mohan helps me up. We walk through thorny brush and my trousers gather many spiny seeds from the plants. The three-inch thorns threaten to shred my arms but, following these three, they easily find a way around the bushes. The soft sand of the ravines gives way to broken rock underfoot – red and flaky. Its sandstone.

We cross a road. The jeep we had driven three days and 250 KM to locate our elusive reformed bandit has had a puncture – from a three-inch thorn. Its comical almost – a vehicle designed for



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life in the rough immobilized by a small piece of wood that looks daunting to me, but to it? Who knows how many tyre punctures these have caused. The driver was sure careful about not driving over branches with these projections but on tracks it was usually impossible to be 100 per cent certain. The driver has fixed the puncture and is waiting on the road, not taking chances. We tell him to switch off and follow; the village is a five minute walk on the opposite side of the road. He gratefully complies – the last three days have been hard on everybody.

In the village, its evident that Brij Mohan is a man of respect, notwithstanding his disreputable past. Dacoits are also called *bagis* in the Chambal region, meaning rebel. Its symbolic of their rebellion against something – society, the government. They are looked upon more kindly by their fellow villagers than the law, understandably. People know behind every dacoit is a sound reason. The most famous of them all, Man Singh, became a bandit after he and his family killed a bunch of Brahmins in his family. It was the climax of a family feud. He ruled the ravines for 20 years before he was killed. In his time, legend had it that Man Singh was invincible. He ran a parallel administration, settling disputes among villagers and earning the title of Raja. At Independence in 1947, a general amnesty was announced and Man Singh returned to his village. Blood lust made him kill afresh and he died in an encounter with the army and police. His lieutenant Roop Narain Sharma, aka Roopa, ran his empire after Man Singh's death. Roopa ran a larger and more ruthless operation till the law put a bullet in him in 1959.

In more recent times, the infamous Phoolan Devi turned *bagi* after she was gang-raped by the Thakurs of her faraway Behmai village. She was from the lowly Mallah caste and this atrocity was the latest in a line of centuries of abuse. Phoolan avenged herself and ran a ruthlessly efficient gang of bandits till she surrendered in the early 1980s.

This tradition of avenging an insult or righting a wrong has earned dacoits respect. Even reformed ones are well-respected and their arbitration skills called upon regularly in villages.

Sitting in his house, Brij Mohan offers us sickly sweet tea in tiny cups, almost too small to hold. It's a departure from the usual tea drinking procedures, that takes place out of glasses. But guests need special treatment, so the microscopic cups. He has two sons and two daughters – no regrets about the girls here.

“My eldest son is with my sister in Niwera, studying in high school. I hope they never have to go through what I did,” says Brij Mohan.

The Dangs, essentially highlands north of the Chambal river, extend over seven tehsils in the districts of Sawai Madhopur, Dausa and Karauli in Rajasthan. The Ranthambhore plateau, between 300 M and 600 M in height, is deeply eroded in places. A lack of forest cover in most of the region has left it open to erosion by water during the monsoons and strong summer winds. The soil is red, originating from the red sandstone that lies beneath. Most of the highlands have no roads – there are dirt tracks that connect villages. These are ideal for cross-country racing and little else. The main transport in villages is camel cart – seldom does a jeep or any other mode of powered transport reach the interiors. There isn't any electricity or telephone. In the Dangs, I was



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well and truly cut off from the outside world. Not that I minded being in the place that time forgot.

But not the people.

They cling to life. They rear cattle and goat on the precarious greenery of the highlands. They eke a single crop from the soil during the rains, if the raingods are kind – if they aren't, they migrate in search of work to nearby towns or villages. Their villages have houses made of piles of stone, bound together with a mixture of cowdung and mud, like it used to be in rural India several decades ago. Their villages are clean and there is little of the overflowing drains that I saw in many other parts of the country. The men of the Dangs work as hard as the women, again a pleasant change from other parts of India where women slog while men play cards. Of course, social segregation of the two exists. Remote villages have schools, albeit two room structures, where teachers actually come to teach and students attend classes. Seldom do teachers bunk – the place sets great store by education and both girls and boys attend at least primary school. The people ask nothing of the government, and get nothing.

The region gets around 800 MM of rain between June and September, enough to support human and animal life. However, the ravines ensure that most of this runs off into rivers and very little stays behind to sustain life.

The Chambal river is Yamuna's main tributary, rising in Madhya Pradesh at Bar Nagar. It flows north till Kota in Rajasthan, where it turns north-east. For a distance it forms the border between Rajasthan and Madhya Pradesh. This is also where the ravines are. Before joining the Yamuna, it turns south-east in Uttar Pradesh and flows through more ravines. The river's basin covers 31,000 sq KM in the three states. Centuries of erosion have created an incredible maze of mud cliffs – the ravines of Chambal. Some are several hundred feet deep – you cannot see the bottom from the top. This extensive, interlinked system shelters countless species of birds and animals. The rivers have several varieties of fish and reptiles. The ravine part of the Chambal river basin is roughly rectangular in shape, around 300 KM long by 100 KM wide. This huge area has thorny, dry deciduous vegetation. Its is a peculiar situation of adversity in the midst of plenty though urban or western yardsticks of poverty do not apply here.

In 1979, a 400 km stretch of the river Chambal and an approximately 2 km wide swathe of the river ravines on either side, an area of 635 sq. km, was designated the National Chambal Sanctuary (NCS). The NCS, an IUCN Category IV (Managed Nature Reserve) lying in the Indus-Ganges Monsoon Forest belt, begins downstream of the Kota barrage in Rajasthan. The sanctuary's lower limit is after Pachnanda near Bhareh in Uttar Pradesh where the river flows into the Yamuna. The entire river basin is a haven for flora and fauna. Apart from the Gangetic dolphin, the other inhabitants of the sanctuary include magar, ghariyal, chinkara, sambar, nilgai, wolf and wild bear.

There is a legend that says the Chambal originated from the blood of cows that an Aryan king sacrificed, seeking supremacy. Unnerved by this ambitious king, the Brahmins cursed him and the bloodied river. That's probably why you will not find a single temple town along the Chambal.



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Whatever the legend, the river remains clean enough to bathe in and drink straight from, even half-way down its course to the Yamuna. In the height of summer, it carries up to 10 times the quantity of water that its principal does, restoring to the Yamuna the respectability of a river after Delhi and Haryana have done their utmost to reduce it to a drain.

My staging point for the Great Daku Hunt is a small village on the north-west fringe of Karauli Ki Dang, Rewali. It's a seven-hour drive from Delhi, or you can take a train to Dausa and bus or jeep from there. The best way to get there is to drive up to Jaipur and take the highway to Agra. Dausa is 57 KM from Jaipur. I turn off the highway here, cross the tracks and drive through the dusty town. Its claim to fame is that it's the constituency of one of the Congress Party's 'promising' young Members of Parliament, Sachin Pilot. Then it's another 40 KM on a fairly good road, lined with enormous mango trees to Lalsot. Traffic is light though the occasional jugad – a vehicle made by marrying the motor of a diesel water pump to a tractor-trailer – hogs the road, forcing me to move over. At an under-construction temple on this road, I turn left onto a narrow but well-paved village road. Fields that are beginning to sprout, interspersed with brown ploughed ones, line the road. Some 10 KM down this village road, dodging jeeps and jugads out to drive me into the fields, low hills rise on either side, some four or five KM distant. They increase in height and when I reach Lalsot, they seem to fill the sky on three sides; I am in a valley of sorts with hills on three sides. The only open side is from where I have come. A veritable cul-de-sac and a great place for a kingdom. Its lush and green, the trees are tall and varied. Tube-wells and handpumps point to an abundance of groundwater. The hills on either side keep the valley well-supplied. There is power and while the mobile does not work in Lalsot, there is an abundance of public phone booths. However, the lushness hides a grim reality – the water table has fallen from 30 feet to 125 feet over the past 10 years because of the tubewells; people have deepened wells and put tubewells into them as well. Handpumps are for drinking; tubewells for irrigation, bathing and washing. Nobody uses wells anymore – its cumbersome. Most houses are made of stone or brick. Nearly all the villages have cemented roads, built over the past couple of years under the Prime Minister's Village Road Project. There aren't any villages with dirty drains flowing all over the place – they have cracked the elementary problem of waste water disposal.

I reach in the afternoon in early May; it's been a hot drive and the coolness of the building is welcome. My destination in the village is a school. Its head teacher gives me a glass of cool water, slightly metallic to taste. Then, a surprise.

"Will you have a cold drink?" he asks.

I know what campaigners for community ownership over water resources feel about aerated drinks. But it's tempting to be naughty. I nod and a little later we have cold drinks in our hands. The empties are promptly returned.

I wait for my trip planner, Chaman Singh, who heads a project in the region to restore water resources, and my two companions Karan Singh from Amavra and Sunil Sharma from Nai Basti. Karan is a thin dark man of around 35; Sunil is older by a decade and well built, with light eyes.



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They both know the Dangs like the back of their hands, having worked in villages there for around five years.

The hills to the west of the school form what is called the Kochar Ki Dang. They are a part of the Lalsot hills. The Karauli Ki Dang are further south and part of the Ranthambhore plateau.

Karan and Sunil arrive a little later and after a round of introductions, they call Chaman to find out when he will come. He will be late, he says. So Karan suggests we visit Godh village where a local Baba lives, in a little roadside Hanuman temple. It's a 20 minute drive from Lalsot, nothing compared to the 300 KM one I've done earlier that day. I had ham sandwiches from home for lunch, so am not hungry.

Karan says, "The Baba is a character. If you have come all this way and have time on your hands, let's go and see him. He is well known in these parts now."

So we reach the Baba's nondescript temple. It's a small, two-room construction with Hanuman's statue in one and his abode in the other. A well stands to one side and a cement platform in front, separating the temple from the road. There is a young man sitting on the wall of the well. The baba is inside with Hanuman. We wait while he finishes his prayers and emerges.

He's wrapped in dirty rags – everything about him is disheveled. From his black flowing hair, through his black beard, to his once-white kurta pyjama and his bare feet. He is the archetypal baba of a thousand pictures. His eyes shine through the mess of hair on his face – they are piercing and shrewd. They contrast with his general, spaced-out behaviour.

Karan, always the talkative one, begins, "This man has come from Delhi to see you baba. Tell us your story."

Godh Baba gives me the once-over. The young man brings out a filthy rug from the baba's quarters and spreads it on the cement platform. He pulls a little water from the well and pours it into a steel lota, which he passes around. Then there is a round of beedis.

Godh Baba says, "In the winter of 2003, I got a call from Hanuman. He said, 'Come with me' in a dream. When I got up in the morning, I found myself in a temple some distance from my village. I started walking towards this temple – my family tried stopping me but Hanuman gave me strength to overpower them all. I lost my mind here, resisting Hanuman's call. He spoke to me daily. He kept me going. Eventually I gave in. Seeing me at this temple, that was broken then, people started coming for help. They came to find out about their stolen property, sort out health problems and find solace in life. When a person asks me a problem, I feel Hanuman speaking in my head and giving me the answer."

Karan interjects at this point. "Tell us the camel story."

Baba says, "A man who'd lost his camel came to me to help find it. I told him the animal was tied on top of a particular building in a village. He located it and with the help of the police, got his animal back."



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Sunil breaks his silence at this point. “The baba became famous after this.”

As if from nowhere, a gust of wind blows sand over us. After a short lull, it gets windy and we are soon in the middle of a dust storm. We move into the Baba's dwelling. Lightening flashes on the Hanuman idol next door and through a stone lattice window, I see the orange monkey god light up with every flash. We sit for a little while longer and then take our leave. I place a tenner in front of the Hanuman idol.

Its dark, dusty and drizzly as we drive back. The road has disappeared under a thick cloud of dust and the headlights barely pierce the gloom. A couple of times I come close to driving into the fields around a sharp turn in the road. Sunil, sitting next to me, cautions me in time so we stay on the road. By the time we reach the school, the storm has blown itself out. Chaman Singh has arrived.

“Nityaji, how nice to see you. No problem getting here I hope?”

“Not at all. Your directions were very precise.”

Chaman is distracted the next moment. “Bring tea, boy.” Then to me, “What will you eat?”

“Whatever. I am not particular.”

He tells the boy to get vegetables from the market and then we sit together on a charpoy to plan my travel over the next three days. He knows I want to meet reformed dacoits who have started working for soil and water conservation in their villages in the Dangs. I also want to see what traditional water harvesting and storage structures exist in this part of the country. That part is a very pleasant surprise.

I eat a simple but incredibly tasty dinner, the first of many, of daal, vegetables, roti and a powder made of ground red chilli, garlic and salt. There is desi ghee on the rotis too. Then we lock up the downstairs and take mattresses and thick quilts up to the roof for a night under the stars. The sky is ink black and I can see the heavens clearly – a contrast to Delhi where light pollution blanks out all but the brightest stars. It is, well, heavenly. The hills are dark forms in the night and the fields behind the school, devoid of crops, glow in the starlight. There is no moon to spoil the view. We go to sleep. Around 2 AM, a storm brews and we have to run downstairs – I have the privilege of a room to myself.

The Lalsot hills are some 700 M high, too daunting to climb. There are villages up there, Sunil assures me.

“There are talabs on top of the hills that were made centuries ago. They are used by villagers who take their herds up for grazing. Gujjars are primarily herdsmen so they spend several weeks in the forests with their herds and use the water from these talais,” he says.



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The hill talabs are the first line of rainwater catchment. There are small checkdams on the nallahs that flow down from the hills that serve the same purpose – checking the flow of water to give it time to percolate into the ground. Then there are khet talais on flat ground that traps the remaining rainwater near fields and villages. These are sort of end-users of water and directly benefit the fields they are built in. The hill and nallah talais have indirect benefits. I can make out where there is a talai by the vegetation; it's much greener around a talab or a talai.

We leave for the Dangs at 6 AM. The jeep comes at the crack of dawn, an hour earlier. It's a Mahindra Commander, just the vehicle for the cross-country ride we will face over the next three days. We load up and are off to Sapotra, the village from where we enter the Dangs in our quest for the reformed dacoits. Karan tells me how he began his career here.

“I had worked with Tarun Bharat Singh in Alwar for a few years. I wanted to do something for my own area so returned here in the mid-1990s. I had heard of a village in the Dangs where water was a problem – they had a talai that had broken. I offered to help them rebuild it. Most villages have talais but they have not bothered to look after them.

“The villagers told me to supply them cement and artisans and they would contribute labour. I did so and got the talai repaired. While the work was on, a dacoit kidnapped some of the artisans and demanded a ransom. I met the man in his lair and told him he had committed a grave sin by kidnapping artisans who were working for the good of the local villagers. The man wanted my watch but I told him if he set right his wrong, he would get many watches. The man gave in eventually and release my artisans but didn't reform himself. He was killed in an encounter with the police.”

That was Karan's first brush with dacoits, one of many. He has been responsible for turning reformed bagis towards water conservation. He is an unlikely campaigner, wiry and self-deprecating.

We reach Kachaheda village, 25 KM from Lalsot. Its small, with 20 Gujjar families. The village claims to be 600 years old and was once was part of the Jaipur kingdom. The houses are scattered any old how. Dusty fields surround the village. We take the only road through it – its concrete, built under the PM's scheme barely a year before. The village's claim to fame is the secondary school that gets students from many villages nearby. One side of the road has the school's compound, stretching from end of the village to the other. The other side has houses and lanes leading into a maze of buildings. The road ends in a steep drop, barely negotiable by the jeep.

Just outside the Kachaheda are a series of talais. They are ground-level ponds, surrounded by six-eight feet high mud walls and open on the side that faces uphill. The land is nearly flat so its hard to see what's uphill and what's downhill but Sunil tells me the villagers have it figured out by watching the flow of rainwater. The crescent-shaped talais stop water outside the village and hold it for several months. This prevents flooding inside the village and recharges their wells, provides water their animals and irrigates their fields. The main talai is on common ground, is about a hectare in area and used to water animals, not for irrigation.



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Gokhalendar Gujjar, a tall man with an impressively white turban, greets me at the talai. He is the physical training instructor in the local secondary school. The village has mostly stone or brick houses – I see a few towards the periphery that are thatched, probably belonging to poorer people from lower castes. The Gujjars are all fairly well-off.

“The groundwater here is brackish. We have to depend only on rainwater for irrigation and for drinking. The talais have helped reduce the brackishness in the village wells so we can drink that water for part of the year now,” he says.

Gokhalendar has about 50 bighas of land, with two khet talais. One wasn't enough to irrigate all his fields so he made another. Now, he says, he gets two crops a year where earlier he got only one. Some of the talais go back several hundred years. Where the land is hilly, there are talais in the hills – called talabs here – that trap rainwater in the heights and help to recharge wells in villages in the plains below. There exists an old and intricate system of talabs and talais in the villages around Kochar ki Dang. Nearly all the fields have talais, built by the farmers with local labour. The mud extracted from the talai goes into building the walls and the field. Every year, the talai is excavated and the mud from its bed makes good manure.

He says, “Next year, I am going to grow fish to make more money.”

It seems innovative uses of water harvesting, an age-old tradition here, is catching on. The spread is slow but seeing is believing – as more farmers use khet talais to water their fields, others are following suit. Hopefully, the water table and brackishness in the groundwater will disappear one day in the not-too-distant future.

We drive south from Kachaheda village towards Thali village. This is at a major crossroads – one road goes to Ranthambhore, another to Gangapur. I am about to meet my first reformed gangster – Jagdish Prasad Gujjar or Niwera village. He looks like an extremely unlikely dacoit – there is no moustache, he is neatly shaved and his hair is cut short. He's literate, having passed the 10th class. He looks around 35. The man is slightly built, dark and dressed in a shirt and trousers that have accompanied him through several fields. He carries a red cloth shoulder bag. At first, when Karan greets him by the roadside, I think its another of his many friends – Karan seems to know every other man in the place – but then he gives me a wry smile and jerks his head towards Jagdish.

“This is the man you want to meet.”

“A reformed dacoit?” I ask Karan, sotto voce. Karan has told me never to use the D-word loudly or ask dacoits questions about their past directly. The rule apparently doesn't apply to Jagdish, though. I am told I can talk openly with him. We enter a thatched tea shop by the roadside and side on red sandstone benches – everything in the region seems to be made of red sandstone.

Jagdish's underworld career began as a go-between for dacoits and mine owners in Dholpur. He used to negotiate with the miners on behalf of the dacoits. They influenced him to join them with tales of the good life – an income of 50,000 a month, little work and complete authority. Jagdish



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spent a fairly short, but intense, time as a bandit, more so than Brij Mohan. The former was in the business for just two years but 'accomplished' much more.

"I joined the Bane Singh group six years ago. I killed people for money, kidnapped and extorted from the same mine owners with whom I had negotiated deals earlier. If a person didn't pay, he was shot. Many times, I did the shooting.

"Two years after I joined them, I went on a mission to a village called Ratnapura where an NGO called Tarun Bharat Sangh ran a school called Tarunshala. I entered the school to rob. There, I saw a book on 'Water on the Mountain' that changed my life. Instead of robbing, I decided to quit. I went and surrendered at the Karanpur thana to Ramnath, the thanedar."

Jagdish spent two years in jail. During this time, the police resolved the cases against him, dropping most of the charges. When he came out of jail, he met Karan Singh soon after and joined the NGO.

"I think its better to earn 10,000 honestly than 100,000 dishonestly. All my gang members have surrendered. I found it hard after coming out jail to get accepted back into society. I also thought of surrendering because sooner or later, I would have stopped a bullet. Why die unnecessarily?"

In this, Jagdish differs from Brij Mohan. The latter had little problems being accepted back while Jagdish did. But the chance to win respect came soon. One day, a marriage party came to his village. Four people from the group fell into a well. Jagdish jumped into rescue them as the others just looked on.

"That won me much-needed respect. Since then, I have built several water harvesting structures in many villages of this area. This so much better than being a dacoit," says the slightly-built former bandit. I try to picture him in black, with a red tilak on his forehead, bandoliers across each shoulder and shotgun in hand, striding the ravines. Somehow, I cannot conjure up the image as we sit in the thatched shade of the tea shop, sipping sickly sweet tea out of tiny cups. The cold drinks stalls across the road look infinitely more inviting and I am dying for a smoke. Leaving Jagdish with Sunil and Karan, I quickly buy myself a cigarette. The others light beedis. We bond over smoke. Jagdish doesn't normally smoke or drink tea, saying these are reminders of his past that he'd rather forget. But with the conversation concentrated on his past, he gives in and has a half-cup of tea and shares a beedi with Karan Singh.

"You must see my work," he says. "Its just a short distance from here."

Then rising, he excuses himself. "I have to go to Gangapur." And turning to Karan, he asks, "Are you going that way?"

Karan says we are going to Sapotra that is further south. Jagdish and I shake hands and he slings his cloth bag over his shoulder.

"When you come next, stay at my village," he says, signaling a bus to stop. Then he's gone.



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The roads are fine and we make Sapotra by lunch-time. Sapotra is the end of the road – after this, we go off-track into the Dangs. There won't be any more roads for the next two days. Sapotra is a small town where farmers get their vehicles fixed; it also has many ghani, or mustard presses. Opposite the dhaba where we eat, there is a ghani – the reek from the freshly extracted mustard oil wafts into the dhaba. Sunil goes off to meet a local contact.

Sapotra is a dusty town, and qualified as an urban centre because it has a municipality. I see evidence of this entity when a tractor loaded with garbage pulls up near the jeep, that's parked next to a large pond, and unloads the trailer so the rubbish pours into the pond. Karan Singh shakes his head.

“That is how they manage their water resources. We tried working with the municipality here but you can see the results.”

The pond has water and pipelines lead from it to a water treatment plant that supplies the town. Garbage in, garbage out, I think to myself. One day they will get sewage to drink.

Sunil's man has disappeared into the Panchayat office. It's getting late – we have a long drive to a village where we'll spend the night. We give the man a few minutes and are about to leave when he emerges, looking hassled. He's a short man in his mid-fifties in a white kurta-pyjama and Gandhi cap. I marvel at his clothes' whiteness in the dusty landscape – must have a ready supply of clothes to remain so white. He looks cool – both mentally and physically.

Netaji, also known as Dhojia Semriwale, has had a long association with both sides of the law. Like Jagdish, he was a go-between for people on both sides of the law. Unlike Jagdish, he didn't get tempted by the dark side in spite of a 15-year long association. Karan offers him a lift as we are headed into Karauli Ki Dang towards Kalyanpura, village in the Sapotra tehsil, where Netaji wants to go. The man is a little wary of our offer, specially with a Delhiite in the vehicle. Karan assures him I am not a government official and Netaji's secrets are safe with us.

Netaji is extremely voluble thereafter, his enthusiasm tempered only by the dense clouds of dust that seem to swirl around as much inside the jeep as outside. We have Sapotra and, it seems, civilization behind. There is no road, just a camel track with dust so deep and fine that only a jeep-sort of vehicle can pass. There are a few scrub trees and plenty of thorny bushes but no shade. The afternoon is hot and even though I want to roll the window down, the dust puts paid to any such notion.

“But Netaji,” says Karan Singh. “You have been a clever man. Making everybody believe that you have left your former rackets.”

Netaji replies, “I have. It's not a question of making people believe something. It's true. I decided rackets are best left alone. I've earned enough.”

Karan says, “Netaji, it's rumoured you made a killing on a deal. The mine owner gave you a fat ransom but the dacoit who demanded was killed by the police in the meantime. Where have you hidden the booty?”



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Netaji squirms. “No ransom was paid. The miner learnt of the killing and refused to pay.”

“How could he? Come on, we wont tell anybody.”

The driver chips in. “Its just us Netaji. We are all employed and not interested in these matters.”

Netaji sticks to his story. “Do you think such booty would have gone unnoticed? Somebody would have come to claim it.”

Sunil chimes in, “Oh Netaji. You are an old player. You would know how to hide it in a safe place and help yourself to it once in a while.”

“Besides,” he adds with a wink at me. “You are always well turned out and never seem to work.”

“You guys are just pulling my leg,” says Netaji. “I stopped being a go-between many years ago. This ransom thing happened much later.”

“Yes, but your name came up as the intermediary, the dalal,” says Karan, using the derogatory term for go-between to provoke Netaji.

The old man isn't moved. The conversation revolves around the ransom and what became of it. We reach a sort of crossroads, rather cross tracks. Netaji wants to get off here and Karan obliges. I have listened silently to the conversation, letting Karan extract information while filing it away. I felt butting in would make Netaji shut up. It has been informative.

“He is still in on it but wont admit to us,” says Karan. “We have a goody goody image among the villages here so people don't like talking about extortions and kidnappings with us.”

I ask, “But you are sure Netaji is still on the take?”

“Quite,” he replies.

I shut my mouth – its full of dust. The others follow suit and Sunil wraps a cloth – his gamchha – around his face. He stares out of the window. We have left the extremely dusty trail but its still dusty. And hot. The rocks over which we are driving have splintered in the heat of the day and cold of the night. Its over 40°C in the day and around 10 at night. There is no road, only a faintly recognizable trail that wends left and right, leading us about eastwards across the Dangs. Progress is slow because the driver has to dodge vicious thorns and large rocks that dot the track. It's a camel track. What a wonderful place for a car rally, I think to myself. Miles of back-breaking trail with no break, no traffic and no facilities. It would test the mettle of the best of drivers and vehicles. I have to complement the Mahindras for making a contraption that, while extremely crude and uncomfortable, covers the trail with ease – that's the important thing. The trail would test the best of 4X4 vehicles and drivers. I glance at the jeep's instruments, expecting to see the temperature gauge in the red but its pleasantly in the blue. Everything is fine, it seems. The trail becomes a rocky gully as it descends from one level to another – the beginnings of a



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ravine. In the rains, this would become a raging torrent, carrying water from the higher level to the lower and in the process, carving out a deeper niche. The gully is full of loose rock and is quite deep in one place. The driver skillfully maneuvers two tyres of the jeep along one side of the cut and the other two on the other side. Then, with all of us holding our breath, he drives over the cut in the first gear. There is a collective sigh when we're past the deep cut.

It's cooler in the lower part of the trail. The trees are taller and vegetation is denser. The trail starts to descend to what seems to be a plain. The vegetation gets denser and suddenly, we are out of the thickets and into a field. It's unploughed. In a corner is a khet talai. Bouncing over the field, we see more and then the first cottage of Rawatpura village. The cottage is a mud and thatch affair, surrounded by a four-foot high fence of thorny bushes. One side has a wooden gate – two posts with a rectangular piece of wood lashed to one of them. A woman sees the jeep and goes inside the hut. We bounce on and more houses appear.

There is no power in Rawatpura, no phones and no running water. Rawatpura could well be the place time forgot, but not quite. There is a single tractor in this village of around 500 people. There isn't any approach road, just the trail through the fields that ends in an open space at one end of the village. A long low house made of stones and topped with large slabs of red sandstone (again) runs along the left of the clearing that ends in a compound with buffaloes in it. To the right are the backs of other houses. One double-storeyed structure has a small balcony sticking out the rear – a woman leans out on hearing the jeep. A buffalo gallops away from us into the clearing.

People appear – from the long low house, the lanes in the village. The village elder is Ramlal Gujjar, a farmer who owns around 45 bighas of land. He is quite old, possibly 60. His white kurta and dhoti tell of long use – both have turned off-white. We sit outside the house, under an awning, and the others of the village gather round. Karan and Sunil engage them in conversation about crops, weather and talais. I wander off into the village.

Save for one house that's double storeyed, all the others are single, and low. The double-storeyed one is much older, possibly a couple of centuries old, and belongs to the local zamindar. It's an impressive structure made of stones and mortar with a large sloping courtyard and lattice-work windows on the first floor. The ground floor has a row of four rooms set back from the verandah. The others houses are made from roughly hewn blocks of stone held together with a mixture of clay and cowdung. The insides are plastered with the same stuff as is the floor. The roofs are made of sloping slabs of red sandstone that are supported in the middle by a central beam, running the length of the room. The roofs also serve as storage areas for food and to dry seasonal vegetables.

Nearly all the women have a ghunghat on their heads, partly covering their faces; the ghunghats are thin enough to see through but too thick to let their faces be seen. The men almost uniformly wear short white kurtas and dhotis. They are moustachioed and grizzly – the daily shave just isn't something they do in these parts. All the houses have courtyards that's where the animals stay, with a raised portion in one corner to wash dishes. They all have verandahs that serve as a lounging area and kitchen – all have blackened walls and roofs and at least one chulha. Most households keep their store of firewood in the front courtyard.



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A baby lies in a cot, hanging from the ceiling of one courtyard. Flies buzz around him as he sleeps and the mother lurks protectively in the background as I satisfy my photographic urge. Below him, a bitch suckles her pups. The village is slowly winding down for the night, the only discordant note being our arrival before dinner time. I return to the jeep and see quite a crowd sitting under the awning.

Ramlal orders a hookah and his wife, also of indeterminate age, delivers a freshly stoked one. He draws first and then passes the pipe around. Karan has already done introductions.

I ask him, "What do people do here? How has farming been the past year?"

Ramlal lets the smoke trail from his nose. Contemplating the middle distance, he says, "Nearly everybody farms in this village. Everybody has land. Usually chana and wheat. Sometimes we grow vegetables and daal. The rains were good last year so we managed a good crop. If there are no rains, the young men and women migrate in search of wage labour. The old stay here – who will employ me."

By everybody has land, Ramlal means the Gujjars, Rawatpur's dominant caste, has land. The others don't count even as persons.

"What have you done for conserving water?"

"With their help, we have built several talais in the fields. These have helped us to grow more. Since 2000, we have doubled our crop output," says Ramlal. The village is reasonably well-off by their standards as my stroll shows – there aren't any jhuggies made of mud and straw or jute bags sewn together.

"Any trouble with dacoits?" I ask him.

All the men shake their heads, some more vigorously than others. It's suspicious, and Ramlal's denial is almost too quick and rehearsed. "Not here. They operate far away from here."

We leave Ramlal to his hookah and head for Nainiyaki, where we will stay the night. The sun is a red ball hovering above the horizon when we arrive. It's an hour's drive from Rawatpura over more punishing tracks. Karan knows his way around the wilderness – he sees tracks where there are none, only hard rock.

Nainiyaki has the only primary school in the entire place, a two-room affair atop a small mound. It has a rooftop water harvesting system that channels rainwater into a concrete underground tank. A handpump helps people get water out – its dry now because all the water has been used up. The handpump was put in to help school children get water without the risk of hauling a bucket out of a well.

I ask Karan, "Do you think the teacher comes to this place. Its so far from anywhere."



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He nods. We walk from the school to the edge of the settlement. The village is set against highlands on a stretch of flat land – behind it, low hills rise, covered with scrub vegetation. Before it, there is an unbroken expanse of red rock that slopes down to the village's fields. The jeep follows us and the driver's told to park inside, where it cannot be seen from outside the village. Nainiyaki consists of two rows of low, single storeyed houses stretching some 1 KM with a road in the middle. It has around 1,000 A few trees on either side give shade during the long hot summer. The street is made of red sandstone slabs placed unevenly together – I have to watch my step. At one end of the street, from where enter, an upended camel cart keeps watch. Then come the camels – all the village camels are parked at the entrance to the village. Crossing these sullen looking creature cautiously, I reach a sort of enclosure as the end of the village where the reception committee is waiting.

Karan takes me into a thatched hut, a sort of tea shop. A large group of men, women and children has gathered there to see us and perchance to talk. No dacoits here, warns Karan, so don't say the D word. There aren't any men with handlebar moustaches, I notice.

In the centre of the hut is the inevitable hookah. I sit on a charpoy and the others arrange themselves in various corners of the hut, accompanied by noise coughing and throat clearing. Karan begins.

“He is from Delhi and writing a book on water. He wants to know what you have to conserve water here. Now you tell him your story.”

A man in his sixties with shrewd eyes, stubby hair and beard with a large dent on his forehead, opens the batting. He is Shishpal Gujjar – you guessed it, this is also a Gujjar village – the headman. The others arraigned around him are his brothers, nephews and their children. A handsome well built dark man of around 35 with an athletes build enters and squats opposite me; the others make space for him. He is Shishpal's son. In different circumstances, Shishpal junior could be in the movies, I reflect. His hair and moustache are jet black and well trimmed unlike those of most others in the hut. Tea arrives and the hookah pipe does its rounds before Shishpal speaks.

“We have been conserving water here for generations. You will see very old talais in the highlands above the village built by zamindars and rajas many years ago. They are all crescent shaped, the open side facing uphill, to catch and store rainwater. They have a small gate at the bottom through which we can let water out into our fields. These talais help us recharge groundwater and give water to wild animals. Then, we have khet talais to store water for irrigation and for animals to drink. Together, they form a system where very little water is wasted. This has been around for generations,” he says.

“What can you grow with this water. Agriculture must be good here?” I ask Mr Handsome.

Shishpal answers, “Chana, mustard, daal, wheat, jowar and bajra mostly. If the rains are good we grow vegetables and rice.”



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Shishpal junior add his bit. “When the rains are good, the place is full of life. We have enough to sell and can live well. If the rains are bad, we migrate in search of work. Most of us go to the sandstone mines near Dholpur.”

I've seen there are no roads in the place. “How do you get around here. There are no roads?”

“We use camel carts. It is extremely tough. More than 10 women from our village have died in childbirth because we could not get them to Sapotra in time,” says Shishpal. The other nod. Accessibility is a major issue here. Even by jeep it's a good five hours to Sapotra; by camel cart it takes two days over extremely rough terrain. It would tax a healthy person, and I can only imagine what it would do to a woman in labour.

Their farms are about a 1 KM from the village where it's less rocky. The only source of drinking water is a handpump a five minute walk from the village sunk in the red rockface; there are none inside the village. Actually, there are two but one always remains out of order. For 1,000 people, it's a shameful ratio – and the government claims that nearly all villages have drinking water. Sink a handpump and forget about it; good for officials figures, bad for the people. The officials take weeks to respond to complaints of breakdowns so having two isn't a bad idea. It's closer than the stream they used earlier, that is 4 KM from the village through forests. The handpump yields a bucket of water, after which the next person has to wait 10 minutes for it to recharge to extract the next bucket. I banish the thought of bathing. People use the handpump strictly for drinking; bathing and washing is done at the nearest talai.

Night falls and the verandahs in all the huts glow with cooking fires. That's the only source of illumination. The stars are the other source. Once my eyes get used to the darkness, I stumble less. I walk the length of the village road. Low walls of the courtyards line the road. All the courtyards open towards the road with the backs of the houses forming the boundary for the village. At the far end, the road peters out into nothingness and I turn back – I have gathered a silent crowd of children and dogs. I walk back through the street lined with flickering verandahs. In places where the houses are lower than the road, I can see over their roofs into the wilderness beyond. There is no space between the houses to exit the village – the only exits are at either end.

A man hails me from his house to have a glass of milk. I shudder but accept. It's fresh and warm from the buffalo and smells of the animal. There is sugar mixed in it – a luxury for them as they have to buy sugar from the nearest market that is also a half-day walk distant.

The women guard their water containers as they would their children. Most are earthen pots; the slightly better-off have steel or brass pots. The village is bone dry, that also accounts for its cleanliness and the lack of drains flowing down the street.

Dinner is in Shishpal's verandah. The three of us sit on the floor, flanked by other men of the village. It's a feast in our honour, lit by the hearth fire. His wife piles extra wood on the fire so we can see what we're eating. A firelit dinner in this place is an exotic idea, even to me. The food's tasty – daal, potato curry and chapattis. Then there are the inevitable chillies and onions. Water is poured straight down the throat, presumably to save the water used in washing glasses. I estimate the per capita use of water at 20 litres a day – 3 to drink, and the rest for bathe and wash



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clothes. Extremely economical, for the people are washed and their clothes are clean. Everybody eats well and to the noise of loud belches, we get up. I'm not ashamed, for once, to belch loudly. There is another round of conversation about local projects after which the charpoys are dragged into the clearing for the night.

There is a thick cotton mattress below and a heavy cotton quilt on top. The night is warm to start with but get progressively colder. I lie awake listening to the drone of talk and watching the stars move across the heavens. Slowly, I drift off.

It must be 3 AM and I wake up, totally disoriented. The stars are still where they should be. But there is a steady scrunch-scrunch sound, followed by a pause and a scraping sound from behind my head. I twist around but cannot see anything in the pitch darkness. The scrunching invades my dreams and I spend the rest of the night in semi-sleep. Day break solves the mystery – it's a buffalo that's spent the night chewing the cud a few feet away. Fanciful images of a carnivore feeding on a carcass evaporate.

"Let's go to the jungle," says Sunil.

"What for," I ask in alarm. Maybe he feels this is a good place to get rid of me.

He laughs. "To get fresh."

In other words, to shit, brush and wash. After the crap, I wash with mud at the handpump and we walk back. In spite of not brushing, these people have remarkably healthy teeth, attributable to constant twig chewing. Not an advert that Colgate would want, though. Chewing uses less water than brushing, and is, well, free. The village is bustling, if you can call it that, when we return. A woman churns milk to extract cream and ghee using a wooden rod twice her height with paddles at one end sunk in a mud pot of milk. Her body sways to the rhythm of the churning – left and right, left and right. Near her, a boy of six or seven sucks milk from a buffalo's udder. The men have already left for the fields and the women will follow later with their morning meal. We have tea and leave, thanking Shishpal for his generosity.

Nainiyaki is indeed a place where time has stood still. Its people live without anything that can be called modern, save for a lone radio, as they have for centuries. No motorized transport, power or phones. The school is the village's sole claim to fame. It's as if the mists of time parted to let me in for a night and have closed behind me to hide Nainiyaki.

A large talai, bigger than anything I've seen so far, opens up to my right. We have driven up a small hill where there is a government rest house about 2 hours from Nainiyaki. The talai is behind the hill. It's got plenty of water, unlike the smaller ones I've seen so far. A woman stands on the far shore, drying her odhni in the wind – it flutters red and long behind her. Her hair flows from her head and merges with the odhni. This is one built under a drought relief project of the government. Uphill from this is a small hill talai with a gate at the bottom. The gate is a large stone block set in the ground with a hole in the middle. Into this hole, a cylindrical stone is lowered to stop water, or raised to let it flow. Simple locally made device. Even this talai has a little water at the deep end.



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The ancient king Mayur Dhvaj ruled in these parts. His palace is half way up the Kochar ki Dang plateau. The story goes thus. His queen was a woman of great beauty, but arrogant. She refused a long line of suitors till her father, fed up with her excuses, ordered her to marry the first creature they saw the next morning outside the palace. This was a peacock.

After the wedding, the peacock flew up the hills and its bride followed, till it alighted on a badh tree where it nested. A storm came up that night and the peacock died in the storm. When Yamraj, the god of death, came for the peacock's soul, the wife refused to let him so. Yamraj eventually gave in and returned the peacock to life. The peacock turned into a man – Mayur Dhvaj, a king who had been bewitched and turned into a bird.

This king was a great devotee of Lord Shiva, indeed he considered himself to be greatest on earth. The king and his wife had one son, who was dearer to them than life itself. Shiva decided to test his majesty's faith and appeared outside the palace gates, riding his tiger, in the guise of a sadhu. The king, being a pious man, invited the sadhu for a meal.

"I'll eat only when my tiger's been fed," said the sadhu. "And he eats only human flesh."

So the king offered various people for sacrifice but the sadhu turned them down. The sacrifice, he said, had to be of somebody dear to the king and the king had to perform the sacrifice himself. The king got the hint. He called his son and said, 'Sit on this rock'.

Then he and his wife got a saw and cut the boy into pieces, had him cooked and fed to the tiger. The tiger was satisfied and Shiva the sadhu sat down to eat. The king and his wife joined him but the sadhu wouldn't start his meal. He told the king to call his boy. The king lost his temper, thinking the sadhu was making fun of him. But at the sadhu's insistence, he called, and the boy came running to eat.

The sadhu assumed Shiva's form. "I am convinced you are my greatest devotee. You sacrificed your only son to please me."

Karan points at a large rock lying in front of the palace. "That's where the sacrifice took place." Who knows.

As I enter the palace, two peacocks walk past an archway in the distance. By the time I reach the arch, they have disappeared. I see them through a window later, sitting on a wall outside a temple far below. Eerie. Maybe Mayur Dhvaj's spirit still lives in these birds.

Below the palace lies a large village, once Mayur Dhvaj's capital. Now its known for its Hanuman temple. Next to the shrine is a tank which, according to legend, never goes dry. Its filthy now, from overuse. The entire village bathes *in* the tank, rather than taking water out and bathing outside it. Its murky water looks most uninviting.



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Outside this, in the middle of nowhere, is a baoli, or step well. I drive off the village road, into a gully that seems to lead right into the hillside. At one point, Karan tells me to climb the side of the gully and the car barely manages the climb. We stop under an ancient peepul tree. A goatherd is pulling water from the baoli. We remove the thorns from the entrance to the well and walk to the bottom, dodging roots and massive cobwebs. The water is just below stair level, too risky to bend down and touch.

The well's fed by underground springs from the Kochar ki Dang. Karan assures me the water is drinkable. The goatherd proves it by pouring some down his throat. We return to the surface.

Karan asks the goatherd for water. He drinks and tells me to follow. It's the most refreshing drink of water I've ever had. It's cool and slightly sweet, thanks to the lime mortar used to build the baoli. One of the ironies of life – here, forgotten by all but the occasional goatherd, is this baoli that still provides clear, drinking water in the middle of a dusty, hot plain.

Truly, something that Indians made before the concept of India, or Bharat, or country arrived on the scene.

Chand ki Baoli is a spectacular step well, its age variously dated at 1200 to 1500 years. Its in a village called Abhaneri, corrupted from Abha Nagri, or town of light. It was probably built by the Pratihara kings who ruled here in the 9th and 10th centuries, AD. Another line of thinking attributes the founding of the village to Raja Bhoja, a Gurjar ruler, in the 9th century.

Chank ki Baoli is at least 100 feet deep, with a maze of steps leading down to a greenish puddle of water at the very bottom. I drive off the Jaipur-Agra highway and head over bumpy roads to Abhaneri. Outside the village is the step well. The concrete wall hides the spectacle within.

At the entrance, the chowkidar has spread his charpoy in the shade of a shelter, built for people who would come to the step well. He and his lackeys follow me into the complex. A few steps to the left and I turn into the step well complex itself. Its aptly named because there are thousands of steps made of stone blocks placed on top of the other. They form an interlocking pattern on the far side; getting down is easy but getting back up is tough. Each step is at least 18' high and narrow so its certainly not for the faint-hearted.

One side of the complex is given to a complex of rooms where, the chowkidar informs me, the ladies of the royal house would come to bathe. There are platforms are various levels that allowed them access to the water in privacy. The rooms are richly carved with figures of gods, flowers and animals. The whole place is made of granite, held together with mortar in places and blind faith in others. There are five levels of rooms, each with its own set of carvings. The top levels have very basic carvings. The lowest level has richly carved pillars and walls. The outside walls of the room complex have stone carvings of various gods and goddesses. Obviously, the royalty preferred the lower levels. The place is cool in the mid-May sun.



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The rooms mostly smell of bat-shit and their voices echo in the halls. Thankfully its daylight and I don't run the risk of being dive bombed by vampires.

The step blocks hang together by force of gravity. The precision of the craftsmen in building the step well is quite amazing. Each step is the same size. Each terrace of stone blocks is fitted exactly the same distance further out so the structure narrows to a small rectangle of water at the bottom, from its square mouth that is some 250' to a side. The stones look new – I cannot believe they have weathered sun, wind and rain for more than a millennia.

The step well has a stone bottom, which means there are no springs feeding it. It only stores the rainwater that runs into the compound and into its depths. The chowkidar, who's been there for 30 years, confidently tells me the well has never been without water.

“The true beauty, sir,” he says, “Is to be enjoyed on a full-moon night. the moon lights up the well and the steps glow.”

I marvel at the feat of engineering, so vast in its scale and so detailed in its execution. Its hung together for 1200 years at least. Chand ki Baoli was one of many such built back then. In modern terms, it would be a small water harvesting structure, but the skill and foresight of its builders sets it above even the largest of India's dams. Besides, nobody was displaced when Chand ki Baoli was built and people are free to use its water. All they need is a bucket and a rope.