



## Chapter 5

### Shekhawati: 'Underground' tanks of the seths

Shekhawati in eastern Rajasthan has produced virtually every business family in India – steel baron Lakshmi Mittal, cement man Dalmia, cloth man Singhanian, Poddars, Ruias, Khaitans. The list is long. Traditionally traders, each developed a town or a part of a town. Shekhawati occupied the old trade route between West Asia and the sub-continent of which water was a vital part. The seths of old built complexes with a tank of water, a temple and a well, many of which survive today in the desert as ghostly images of the past and conjure up images of caravans.

Forests once covered this place but have disappeared – there is no living memory of them. Now most of Shekhawati is desert, sandy or scrubby. People farm – growing dryland crops like bajra, gram, mustard, pulses or jowar – or live off animal husbandry. There is little industry despite having spawned the core of India's industry. It's a dry and inhospitable land, with the underground water having turned salty – so deep have tubewells gone. Where it's not salty, its high in fluoride. In either case, its unfit for drinking by man or animal. The trees dotting the landscape are gnarled, of indeterminate age. They are prized possessions, feeding animals through the year and people when the rains fail. But they aren't treated as prize possessions and new trees are seldom to be seen.

Shekhawati's towns – Jhujhunu, Churu, Sikar and Chirawa, Ramnagar – are more famous for their painted world-famous havelis that now barely echo the grandeur of the past, than for water conservation. Yet, one wasn't possible without the other. The seths and the rulers took care to ensure a steady and adequate – if not abundant – supply of drinking water, and where possible, irrigation water, for the people. Shekhawati thrived as a trading area till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Then the seths moved away, to Bombay, Delhi, Calcutta and Madras to tap into rapidly expanding commerce and the opportunities it brought. They abandoned Shekhawati, their beautifully painted and carved havelis and the sandy towns to the locals, who continued to live as they had for eons, growing dryland crops of gram and millets and rearing camels and more recently, goats. The goats finished off what little greenery there was left; the forest department and locals completed the destruction by cutting and selling or burning trees. Shekhawati now is a backwater – a handful of seths have returned to give back to the place of their ancestors the gift of water.

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It's a short overnight journey to Jhunjhunu in the heart of Shekhawati in eastern Rajasthan. The metre gauge train starts from Delhi at 11 at night and gets there at 5 in the morning. Its second class air conditioned is as good as first class a/c in broad gauge trains with doors to lock passengers in. The first class a/c differs in that it has carpeting. It feels like a toy train, narrower and somewhat more derelict than its broader cousins.

At quarter to 11 the train silently slides onto the platform, much like the hulk of a ghost ship. It is dark, the windows are shuttered and the doors are locked. A few coolies and sundry touts hang



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onto the doors, struggling to push their hands through their window bars and open them so that they can grab seats to sell to passengers later. Most of the coaches have these leech-like appendages as they are second class ordinary. There is no first class, having being dumped by the Railways some decades ago as a vestige of the Raj. My second air-conditioned coach slides into view and I pick up my suitcase to follow it.

There is the usual rush to board the train, with men and women scurrying up and down the platform searching for their coaches and seats. Most simply want to board the train to get from Delhi to their destination as the train services the Rajasthan hinterland from where a lot of migrant labour comes to Delhi to work in the construction industry. These people dominate the passengers; they crowd out any reserved ticket holders with their bundles of food and clothes and their little bedding rolls. As soon as the train moves, they spread their bedding on the floors, regardless of where they are, and after a little jabbering, go to sleep.

I don't get much sleep in spite of having put on an alarm to wake me before getting to Jhunjhunu. The attendant comes however, a little while before we get to Jhunjhunu, on time at ten past five in the morning, to get me up.

Jhunjhunu's station isn't anything to write home about – a platform and a half with a narrow exit and entrance. Then a portico where you are supposed to be picked up or dropped off. Only, the crowd of people there makes it impossible to get a vehicle; instead, the jeeps and shared diesel three wheelers wait in a dusty courtyard beyond the portico, engines idling, for passengers to lumber up. They have fixed rates and given the size of the town, these sound ridiculously low. I pay 5 rupees for a kilometre's ride to the pretentiously named Hotel Shekhawati Heritage.

My host in Jhunjhunu, Niranjan Singh who heads the Shekhawati Jal Biradari, had asked me my budget and when I said anything under Rs. 1,000, he chose this hotel. The others, he assured me later in the day, were well over that. Shekhawati Heritage is an extremely basic hotel, more a lodge, at Rs. 600 a night, including taxes. The gate is locked and its dark inside at 5:30 AM. There is no bell to push so I find a stone and rap on the gate. Presently somebody hurries to open the gate and lights come on. I am ushered into the portals, down the drive, into a hallway and to my room at the end of the hall. It's a bare hall with another four doors, all leading to rooms.

I get a largish room with a TV and phone. There are shelves that are painted with stuff that comes off on whatever I place on them, so lining them with newspaper is a good idea. A curtain separates this well-appointed area from the rest of the room, serving the purpose of a cupboard door. It has seen cleaner days in the dim and distant past. The bathroom is large enough to shit and bathe in, but not two people together. There isn't any hot water, I gather quickly, from the presence of just a single tap in the bath area and the sink. Thankfully, there is water.

But the water is salty. Its not brackish, its salty. Impossible to get a shave in that water as nothing will lather. Hard to bathe because the tiny soaps that the hotel has given run out before I can work up a decent scrub. Still, it will have to do what with my budget. The drinking water, which a tall, gaunt and haunted looking attendant brings in, isn't salty thankfully. It looks safe to drink but as I still have a bit of my bottled water left, I finish that off, ask for tea and proceed to get



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ready. Niranjan calls me at 7:30 to find out when we should meet. 9-ish I tell him and he rings off.

Its 9 and I am waiting outside the hotel in the bright hot sun. A jeep clatters up in reasonably fine fettle - there are two men inside, one of whom will be my guide for the day. Niranjan arrives grandly late around 10.

“Nitya bhai, sorry for being late. I got caught in a meeting. Can we spend half an hour fixing your programme for the next few days?”

“Yes, let's. And also who will be with me. Are you going to come along?” I ask, wondering what meeting he had at 8 in the morning. Niranjan's a 50-ish man, tall and well built, with salt-and-pepper hair and large piercing eyes. He smiles a lot and speaks Hindi that even littérateurs would need a dictionary to translate. Niranjan is always in khadi kurta-pyjama; they are his trademark. He owes his physique to his days in the army.

“I beg forgiveness for the first three days but on the last day I will come along with you. On all three days, you will see a mix of old and new water harvesting structures. Some of the old water structures are hundred of years old. Most of the new ones have been with support from a seth. At Chirawa, the Dalmias built a school many years ago, and they have recently installed a large rooftop rainwater harvesting system. Its remarkable.”

And, turning to my guide, “Is that OK with you Parshuramji?”

Parshuram has a few clarifications on where we have to go. Then, “You had better get going, its already quite hot,” says Niranjan. Nice touch, considering that he is the reason for our late start.

We get into the jeep, a Mahindra Commander. It's in reasonable shape and the driver has put clean white cotton seat covers. The jeep, Parshuram tells me, is the only vehicle that will comfortably go to the area we have to visit – a bunch of villages and the towns of Shekhawati. Its not the most comfortable vehicle to get around in, though, and in the heat of the desert day in May, it gets worse. However, the noise, heat and dust are just beginning.

Parshuram's advice is, “Take plenty of water”. Right. But Niranjan is opposed to bottled water, as indeed are most people campaigning around the country for local community control over water resources. It's not too much of a dilemma for me – I'm carrying a flask that I fill with cold water. The others have a harder time refilling a bottle of Bisleri on the quiet. Anyway, water and other formalities over, we leave. A final word from Niranjan.

“Nityabhai, I will see you in the evening.”

I nod, “I'll call you around 9 or so.” And we are off.

We make a quick tour of Jhunjhunu itself, while getting out of town. It's quite unremarkable as towns go – dusty, wide open spaces and a small market place. Jhunjhunu has its share of havelis – the residences of the rich traders who have long since migrated to larger cities. Without



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exception, these rambling mansions are elaborately built, copies of palaces of kings, and richly painted. The paintings are usually gods and goddesses, hunting scenes and depictions of the Ramayan and Mahabharat. The paintings are often as old as the building itself and have seldom been restored. If indeed they could. They are made on lime plaster with vegetable dyes. The anonymous painters depicted their subjects in great depth. I often get to see 'restored' paintings – grey-brown cement on portions that have fallen off. Nowhere has there been a serious effort to conserve this priceless open-air gallery.

The road to Alsisar, the first village on our itinerary, is narrow and smooth. I am sitting in front, so have a good view of the surroundings as well as a smoother ride than those at the back. Parshuram doesn't have to guide the driver too much – the driver's used to this route, having ferried numerous visitors. Ganesh is his name, and he's been jeeping over these roads a good long time.

"I used to work in Dubai but returned 10 years ago to drive this taxi. My brother and I own two jeeps and we both drive them. We don't trust drivers," says he. He's a cool driver, not a wild-night-tonight type who tears up the tracks. Makes sense, especially when you aren't sure if you will see a goat, camel or cow around the next bend.

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Alsisar is a large village about 40 km north of Jhunjhunu. We come upon it suddenly. The road meanders over small hillocks, actually sand dunes, that make for an undulating ride. There aren't any real hills here, just very high sand dunes covered with scrub, a few hardy trees and thorny bushes. Stuff of real hot and arid lands. Human beings are the most abundant life form, followed by the plants and goats. The ship of the desert doesn't walk alone – camels are too valuable to be turned loose to graze, unlike cows in India's cities. They are either tethered to trees in the middle of nowhere or pulling camel carts – their wheels are usually discarded aircraft tyres.

A turn around a sand dune reveals Alsisar. A vast open space, flanked by single storied houses, terminating in a low-walled enclosure, welcomes visitors. The road disappears under sand at this point – sand which is soft and yielding and as yet cool to the touch. At 11 AM, the sun hasn't heated it to baking temperature. All the houses reflect the sun, dazzling me, as they are nearly uniformly white. I see a few old men but little else – those that can work are either in their fields, ploughing for the coming sowing season or in offices. The people of Shekhawati set get store by a government job because there are few industries or other avenues of employment here. Farming is the main occupation here.

A board on a building to my left reads Panchayat Ghar – the local Panchayat office. Parshuram leads me into a small lane next to the Ghar and into a maze of houses beyond. He climbs over a low wall behind the Panchayat Ghar, onto a giant square-shaped saucer with a dome in the centre. The cemented floor, somewhat black with age and lack of maintenance or cleaning, slopes gently down towards the dome. At the base of the dome, where it joins the floor, are little arched openings no higher than a brick each, one to each side of the square saucer. Each side of the saucer, I estimate, will be about 100 feet – that makes for a 100 feet square saucer, or catchment area.



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“This Nityaji, is a tank (tanka in local parlance). It's about 80 years old. A seth of the village built it and we have recently cleaned and renovated it,” says Parshuram, proudly. It was built of stone, bricks and lime mortar but the renovated parts, mainly the dome, are done in cement. The contrast is striking.

The seth remains a nameless benefactor – nobody knows his name and the locals don't remember it. The tank is an underground storage device that holds up to 100,000 litres of drinking water. Atop the central dome is a well with a bucket from where people can draw water; convention has it that tanka water is for drinking only. The underground reservoir is lined with lime mortar and bottomed by bricks, so whatever water flows inside is saved from seepage and evaporation for several months even in that hot climate. Rain falling in the saucer runs into the holes at the bottom of the dome and into the underground tank. I can see the difference between the original structure and the renovated part; the renovated part, which is mostly the dome, is made of concrete while the original structure is made of lime mortar and has turned black over the decades.

Another renovated feature – plastic pipes running from the roof of the Panchayat Ghar and a few other surrounding buildings into the saucer. These augment the rainwater falling into the saucer.

“By adding these pipes, we have doubled the catchment area of this tanka,” says Parshuram. The pipes bring down the rainwater from the surrounding roofs and fill the tank quickly; less wastage, more water.

“Doesn't the water get dirty?” I ask.

“We clean the saucer before the rainy season starts. We remove all the grass and bushes that have come up, sweep the place and remove any other dirt that's accumulated there. When it rains only the clean water flows into the tank,” he says.

In addition, people living around the tanka have decided not to let animals into the saucer. There is a high wall around it but even so, they drive away errant goats and dogs.

The tanka is a simple system to provide drinking water to people for up to 10 months. The new ones hold between 10,000 and 30,000 litres of water which lasts a family of five for seven or eight months, cost Rs. 25,000 to make and fit into the courtyard of even a modest dwelling. Most new tankas have round catchment area with a diameter of 20 to 25 feet. They can be walled to keep animals and children out, even though its safe – the holes at the base of the central dome are too small for any child or animal to enter.

Building tankas is a joint effort. The community or the owner, as the case may be, chips in with the labour that typically constitutes a quarter of the total cost. Tanka water is strictly for human consumption; animals may get a share in drought years but irrigation is a strict no-no. Just a few days' rain are enough to fill a tanka because that's how they have been designed. The tankas also need little maintenance.



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Tanks are either privately owned in this part of Shekhawati or communally owned. The distinguishing feature is the situation of a tanka. A tanka built inside a person's house is individually owned while ones like this are communally owned. There is no restriction, however, on people drawing water even from individually-owned tankas, provided the family that owns it feels there is enough water for their needs. Such large tankas, as the one in Alsisar, are seldom built any more even though hold over 100,000 litres of water – they would cost upwards of Rs. 400,000 and anyway nobody makes lime mortar any more.

Visions of falling through rotting concrete into a huge cesspool float before me. I voice my concern and Parshuram assures me that the water tank is only in the centre; I stand on solid ground. Stepping out, I notice a small foot-high 'temple' in a corner. A soot-blackened idol sits inside with a miniature trishul standing guard. It's newly-whitewashed, standing in stark contrast with the blackened top of the saucer.

"At every tank you will see has a temple either inside it or just outside," Parshuram explains. "That's because we don't want people pissing or shitting nearby so that the catchment area remains clean. We also emphasize the close connection between water and religion in India by building a small shrine." The shrine has no deity inside; just a place to light a lamp as if beckoning travelers in the night to water. A reminder to me that giving water to the thirsty is one of the noblest of deeds. It's also an effective deterrent to misuse and water pollution.

The tankas have sorted out some of the drinking water problems that people have faced in recent decades but not that of irrigation and water for animals. The groundwater water in this part of Shekhawati is saline; in other parts it has a higher-than-healthy concentration of dissolved fluorides. Drinking water, therefore, has to come mainly from above. Literally from rain, figuratively from the government through taps.

Emerging from the saucer and the surrounding houses, I am surrounded by a bunch of dusty snotty kids. They keep a distance, which is welcome, as I walk to the low-walled structure at the end of the open area. It's a talaab, or pond – a square manmade structure also designed to collect and hold rainwater. The difference is, talaab water isn't used for drinking but for bathing and washing clothes. The larger talaabs cater to animals and irrigation for crops. This is a smallish one, about 75 feet square, with a puddle of water accumulated in the centre.

The walls surrounding it are waist-high and about a foot and a half thick, made of lime and plastered with the same stuff. Hardy, because its withstood over a century of use and, of late, abuse. Some three decades ago, a United Nations agency decided that these talaabs were the root cause of malaria in the country and systematically set about destroying them. Never mind the fact that the water in these talaabs supports aquatic life that does not let mosquitoes breed. Within the perimeter, along the walls, steps descend to a central square that still holds a little filthy water. People could bathe or wash their clothes on these steps, or simply congregate and spend the time of day.

Talaabs, explains Niranjana two days later, were the cornerstone of traditional village life. People went there to bathe, wash clothes and gossip while their animals had a drink. Large trees usually grew around these talaabs and the place was cooler during the day because of the water, making



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it the hub of communal life during the day. Next to this derelict specimen stands a large peepul tree, the seat of village gatherings in years gone by; now it's a garbage dump and the tree, a refuge for goats and cows.

The talaab mechanism is even simpler than the tank one. Its built at a low point where natural gradients meet. Rainwater flows along these gradients, through holes in the wall of the talaab, into the square collection area. The talaab has a concrete or rock bottom that does not let the water seep into the ground – it can hold water for several months and if the rains have been good, for the entire year till the next rainy season. There is a definite pecking order in the use of talaabs, something that was traditionally inviolate. People bathed on the steps along their sides – they didn't use soap back then because there was no soap to be used. They washed clothes, again without soap. This water stayed within the talaab. Most talaabs were built with an overflow area – when the main tank was full, water flowed over a wall into another sloping tank without steps. Animals – domestic and wild – drank from here. This simple system separated men from animals and kept the water of the talaab clean for human use. Lime mortar, that was used to make these talaabs, is believed to purify the water as well.

Sadly though, the catchment area of talaabs is much larger than tanks. This leaves them open to encroachment and once encroached, its sewage from houses and not rainwater from the catchment area, that flows into the talaabs. In addition to this rot, surrounding houses and the municipality treats abandoned talaabs as garbage dumps. A combination of factors, accumulated over the recent decades, have wiped most talaabs off the face of Shekhawati.

“It's the alienation of people from their natural habitat. People are concerned more about money, the here and now, rather than the good of the community and the future. They expect the government to provide them water and electricity, roads and education. There is piped water, even though supply is erratic. Its more convenient than drawing water from a well far away. Its made people lazy,” philosophizes Parshuram.

It sums up what went wrong and why the people of Shekhawati now face a water crisis, partly of their own making. Its also partly of the government's making – a government that promised grandiose schemes of drinking water on tap and laid pipelines hundred of kilometres long to bring water from distant lakes and rivers to this region. Like all supply lines, this too is vulnerable as the people discovered; there are frequent disruptions. The resorted to digging tubewells. This solution worked excellently for some years. Then the water table began to sink and the depth of the tubewells increased till strange diseases started happening. Analysis of water samples showed a high concentration of fluorides; the water also tastes salty in the region around Alsisar and right up to Chirawa.

The sarpanch emerges as we prepare to leave. A middle aged man in a white dhoti-kurta, with a white turban and a speckled moustache.

“Where do you get water for your animals?” I ask him.

“We use the tap water for the animals,” is the prompt reply. Tank water for humans, taps for the animals. “Not tank water?”



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He shakes his head. The conventions still bind people, no matter how much of tradition they have forgotten. Is that enough?

“We save up water for the animals and now the taps supply enough water,” he says. “But we don't drink it because we don't know where the water comes from.”

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My eyes have been opened. These circular ‘satellite dishes’ are actually to catch water from the skies, not signals from outer space. Did an extra-terrestrial intelligence give us the technology to build them, though. Parshuram is unmoved by the question.

We drive north from Alsisar – its hotter now and the road shimmers in the heat. A dust devil beckons us on, past thorny scrub and sandy dunes, to the next village. In the lee of a dune stands another talaab, a patch of green against a desolate desert scene. But its been abandoned as well by all but the stray animal. There is water at the bottom of the talaab, presumably from the rains in winter six months before. Its catchment is intact, sort of, as its located miles from any village. As we drive past, I see neither man nor beast near the talaab; in a few years it will have become one with the desert it sought to provide succour from.

The animals cannot drink groundwater because its saline. If they do, the heat and salt in the water kills them in a few hours. The salt in the water leaches out the salt from their tissues and the heat completes the dehydration. Human beings cannot drink it for the same reason. And its useless for agriculture but farmers still use it, desperate to eke one crop from the sandy soil in a year. In a few years, though, their fields turn saline and useless for any production. They have to be left fallow for many years before they can be used again, if at all.

I see a lone house in the middle of what must be fields. The ground is ploughed and there are more trees than normal. Next to the house, I see a smouldering cylindrical structure with a conical shaft below it made of bricks – a lime kiln. Two men tend to the kiln, one feeding coal to the fire in the pit and the other adding stone that will be oxidized to lime. It's a primitive contraption and making lime is a painstaking process. The lime settles at the bottom of the pit and is extracted very gingerly and put in a steel drum to cool. If you touch it, you can burn yourself very badly.

Seeing how lime is made, I understand why people don't use its mortar anymore even though it is believed that structures made of lime mortar are cooler than cement ones and keep water cleaner. They also last a good deal longer, as evidenced by the remains of early Islamic buildings. Nearly all the new tanks are made of cement and bricks.

Traditionally, the seths built the tanks as they were only ones with the money to do so – they gained merit and hopefully an early release from the endless cycle of birth and rebirth in the process. The local people always chipped in with labour, that was counted towards their contribution, so that they could use the water when they needed it. This also gave them a stake in looking after the tanks – they cleaned them before the rains, made sure animals didn't get into





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the catchment areas to shit or piss, repaired minor damage and generally guarded water with their life. This symbiotic relationship lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

However, the system began to decay in the 1970s with the advent of piped water and handpumps. From a community resource, water entered the private realm. Taps made it possible to get water inside one's home, whereas earlier women had to congregate at the tankas to draw their water. This changing focus naturally meant that tankas dwindled in importance and slowly fell into disuse. The government also did its part by claiming ownership of all tankas that were built on public or common land. Local people who were concerned with their upkeep were told to lay off, the government will provide. The Panchayats were given money for this but assurances were seldom translated into action.

"It's like this," explains Niranjana. "If you take away something that for generations I have regarded as common property and have looked after, and say you will now manage it for me, why will I have a stake in its upkeep. Then you give a local leader money for maintenance which does not happen. How can you expect local people to contribute anything when they know that the money that's come for looking after their common resource has lined the leader's pocket?"

There was, and is, a hierarchy of drawing water, depending on the caste of the person. These were strictly enforced earlier, but with shrinking sources, they became more rigid.

"Upper castes always get preference. If they are bathing, Dalits cannot come close to the water source," says Sunetra Lala, who's spent several weeks in Rajasthan's villages. "And if a Dalit is drawing water, an upper caste person can butt in for his piece of the action at any time. The discrimination varies from village to village but it's there."

It was always the lower castes – sweepers and the like – who cleaned the tankas before the rains. But their labour was not always rewarded in kind. Niranjana is hesitant to talk about this.

"Casteism is always there. I have seen that it has reduced in recent years. In all my work, I have always made sure that people from all castes work together to construct the tanka," he says. Maybe it works here, because Niranjana's organization, the Dalmia Trust, makes the financial contribution that is about two-thirds of the total cost while labour constitutes a third. By this, he claims that the distribution of water, and maintenance of the tankas, is done equitably.

"Else why would a Dalit chip in along side a Brahmin," he reasons. I do not see this happening so uneasily take his word for it.

Around Malsisar, the groundwater is saline. Water levels have been falling by up to five feet a year because of handpumps and tubewells. At 350 feet, there is a thick layer of rock below which there is no water.

Parshuram directs the driver through the bylanes of Malsisar. It's a biggish village, with the drains overflowing onto the lanes. Under the Prime Minister's Rural Roads Scheme, a half kilometre stretch of concrete road has been built in the centre of the village; on both sides, the road is broken. It's a steep climb up to, and off, the concrete section, the only one without



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sewage flowing on it. Incongruous. A water tank atop a cement tower beckons us – there is a gaushala that Parshuram wants me to see where tankas have been built to tap rainwater for the cows.

Inside Malsisar, in a clearing, there is a colourful group of women filling pots from a large cylindrical water tank that is filled by the government supply once every two days. It's a 15-foot high concrete cylinder that holds around 20,000 litres. On one side, there is a line of taps and a long sink. The women are brightly clad in pink, orange and red sarees that catch the sun in all its splendour. There are a few children too, but water-filling here, as in most of India, is a female chore.

The tank has replaced the tanka and the talaab as the centre of rural life. Its less of a binder though – women have to queue up to get their quota of water instead of walking to the water's edge and dipping in. The taps are functional and easier to use, no doubt, and women don't have to walk any great distance to get water. But they are a poor substitute for talaabs as a means of social cohesion. Nearby, a group of men sit and gossip at the local paan shop.

The gaushala is run by a local trust, patronized by a seth of the locality. It's an old place that has been looking after unwanted cattle for several decades. Entering it under the shadow of the concrete water tank, I'm struck by the cleanliness within. Its not like any other cow yard, full of shit and half eaten fodder. The ground is swept, the cows in their sheds (where else) and the bulls in theirs. No unwanted pregnancies here. Plastic pipes run from the roofs of nearly all the buildings into the ground – they flow into two tankas., one on either side of the entrance. These are not the regular satellite-dish tankas but just underground water tanks to hold rooftop water. A plaque in front of one proclaims it has been made by the Shekhawati Jal Biradari at a cost of Rs. 25,000 a year before. The plaque in front of the other tanka is broken, presumably by a cow backing into it. Peering through the thick steel bars of a cowshed, I see a particularly nervous specimen at the rear, separated from by several steel gates. The reason is soon apparent – the animal snorts, tosses its heads and mock-charges the gate nearest to it. If it had a free run, it would have probably charged the main gate. It's an impressive animals with long sharp horns, standing some five feet at the shoulder. I would not like to be at the receiving end of the charge and, I am sure, neither would anybody else.

The gaushala system is a departure from the usual rainwater harvesting practice in Shekhawati, where tankas are built to store water exclusively for human consumption.

I meet Ram Babu from Jatawa Khurd, a man of around thirty, dark from spending his days in the sun, tells me, "I had sunk a tube well to irrigate my crops several years ago. For some years, things were fine. Then others started sinking tubewells and the water level went down. It doesn't rain much here. Now, I have reached the 350-foot level and the tube-well is useless."

Ram Babu has made a tanka in a corner of his field and he has a shared tanka in his house. The field tanka is essential because it's a long walk – about 4 KM – from his village to the field. His labourers need the water when they are working and he lets others draw water. Its not much of a field – ploughed sandy earth sloping fairly steeply up a sand dune on one side, dotted with



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gnarled Khejri trees. The light brown sand shines almost white in the sunlight. The tanka blends with the field. The water code is fairly rigid – tanka water is only for drinking.

Agriculture, then, is back to being completely dependent on rains. If it rains, it pours. But otherwise, men from this region migrate in search of work and money. Irrigation with groundwater is risky. It always means the field has to be kept fallow for two or three years after growing a crop water with underground water. Else, the soil will become saline and useless. A couple of rains later, the soil is ready for another crop with the salty groundwater. Its conventional wisdom and no scientist has advised farmers on this. No scientist has advised them on the 'right' amount of water to use for irrigation either – the result, says Niranjana, is that farmers with pumpsets flood their fields when they are growing something.

Parshuram says, bouncing up and down in the back of the jeep, "It used to get so bad that people had no water to drink. Those that left in search of work lived to return but those that stayed behind often didn't make it through droughts. These tankas have at least solved their problem of drinking water in the summer and through droughts."

Each tanka can supply a family of five drinking water for up to eight months if it rains well for even three or four days. The tanka fills up and the overflow is let into the fields through a concrete channel. Animals can drink from this channel but are kept out of the 'satellite dish' of the tanka by either thorny branches of the desi babul or barbed wire. The thorns are vicious – two or three inches long – and can puncture my jeep's tires. The driver is wary of them too.

It's hot now and the bottle of water I have is also lukewarm. Not palatable at all. I wonder how the people here manage in the burning sun. The sand that seeps into my sandals when I step out sings my toes. Of course, locals are not made to go out in the midday sun – that's the prerogative of mad dogs and Englishmen and itinerant travelers. Parshuram looks distinctly uncomfortable and hot as well. I offer him some water. He shakes his head, preferring to drink from a nearby tanka instead.

It's a small concrete structure in the middle of a field, surrounded by babul branches. I step over them carefully, hard to do because the satellite dish is two feet above field level. The tanka isn't locked, like some others have been. I open the heavy iron lid and peer in – it looks about half full. The water is clean.

"It's about three-fourths full," corrects Parshuram. There's a steel bucket with a rope lying upside-down on the dish. Parshuram drops this into the opening, dips once and draws up half a bucket of water. He closes the cover and pours the water from the bucket into another bottle he is carrying. Then, tilts his head back and pours the water down his throat. I take a little water into my hands and drink it tentatively. Clean or not, it's different from what I am used to. But the water is fine and tastes of, well, nothing. It's cooler than my bottle so I top up the bottle, throwing caution to the winds. I see no mosquito larvae or other unidentified floating objects in the water so I decide it's fit to drink. It's rainwater anyway so no industrial effluents or pesticides here. And the tanka's well is lined with cement on all sides and the bottom to minimize wastage. Water cannot get in from the sides or the bottom, only from the sky.



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“If you had water from an old tanka that’s made of lime mortar, you would notice the difference,” says Parshuram. “That is sweet water. This one tastes a little of cement.”

Lime mortar, he says, keeps the water clean and free of insects. It even gives the water a sweetish taste. Having seen the state of lime mortar tankas, I decide to give the trial a miss.

I use a little, as little as possible, maybe two handfuls of the water to wash the salt off my face. Its welcome in the shimmering heat and the water cools me a bit. From behind a wall of shrubbery, a buffalo comes galloping into the field in which the tanka is followed in short order by goats and sheep. Then the shepherd, clad in a checked dhoti and light kurta, with the trademark Rajasthani turban – no flaming red here, a sober striped green. He pauses, seeing us. He’s a boy, maybe in his mid-teens.

“Where do you graze them?” I ask him. Parshuram translates into the vernacular.

The boy gestures vaguely over the nearby sand dune.

“There is some pasture there,” he says. I walk over the crest of the sand dune. Its as barren on that side as it is on this. Maybe the animals can see what I cant.

“He means the Khejri trees and the babul,” says Parshuram, coming to stand beside me. There are more Khejri and babul trees ahead but I notice a singular lack of young ones. Khejri, I must explain, is a stunted tree, about 14 to 20 feet tall, with a head of branches from which sprout little leaves. Those that still have leaves – the locals have cut most green branches for fodder – look luxuriant in the hot sun. They provide fodder, fuel and furniture wood for the people here. Despite their importance and obvious local adaptation, they aren’t multiplying.

“Its overgrazing. That and the tractors used to plough the fields kill off saplings. We have tried to protect saplings wherever we have found them but its not worked.”

We stop in front of a house with a large courtyard and a bougainvillea growing in front. Its bright red flowers contrast with the stark whiteness of the courtyard’s wall. It’s a high wall so I cannot see inside. This is Parshuram’s in-laws’ house.

“Come and eat,” he invites.

“It’s too early to eat,” I protest.

I enter through an arched doorway. The courtyard is large – its size is proportional to the owner’s wealth. This one, like most others, has a dirt floor though a few have stones. Parshuram guides me up five stairs to a building on one side of the courtyard with a large verandah that has several charpoy. Its for guests and generally for the menfolk to hang out. Its made of bricks and cement, the roof of stone slabs placed horizontally on steel rails. Like everything else, it a dazzling white.

In the middle of the courtyard is the main building. A low wall defines an inner courtyard in front of this double-storeyed structure. On one side of the courtyard against the wall of the



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building is the hearth; on the opposite side is the washing area with pots of water and a brick-high wall. His in-laws sit on the floor in the verandah of this building to eat. Behind the house is where the animals are kept. In one corner of the courtyard stands a spanking new tractor – like with most other vehicle owners, its parked in front for all to see. I don't see any loo – the fields serve this important purpose.

His sister-in-law appears with a ghunghat on her face, steel glasses pushed one inside the other in one hand and a small steel pot of water in the other. She doles them out and then pours water into each.

“Bring tea,” says Parshuram.

She re-appears a little later with a steel tray with tiny tea cups and some salty snacks. Then, “Will you have lunch now?” asks Parshuram.

“I don't think we should trouble your in-laws,” I say.

The sister-in-law speaks from behind the veil, “No trouble. We just need to make the rotis.”

I give into the temptation of home-cooked food. Its served shortly in the other building.

I wash my hands in courtyard at the base of a tree and sit down on the jute rug to eat. The vegetable is potato curry, red and with a thin oil film. The daal is yellow. The rotis are smeared with ghee. She sets the plates and bowls before us and then splashes the daal and vegetable into the bowls. The rotis follow. There is some dry chutney – a mixture of garlic, chilli and salt – and wet chutney made of coriander, mind and chilli.

“Its homemade ghee,” the sis-in-law explains. At that point I see the chef – Parshuram's mother-in-law and greet her with a namaskar. I eat like a pig; maybe it's the desert heat that sharpens my hunger.

Later, Niranjana explains the near-dominance of pucca houses. “This region has sent many people to the armed forces. In fact, a man from nearly every house serves in the army or has served in the army. The first thing they do on retirement is build a house with their gratuity and provident fund. They all like to keep their houses clean and orderly. This seeming prosperity is a fairly recent thing though.”

Most houses do appear new, maybe less than a decade old. Their functional whitewash is a stark contrast to the painted havelis of the seths, usually pink or fuchsia with colourful hunting scenes on the outside walls. Hardly any of the villagers' houses have paintings as they are usually new, less than 20 years old. It's one way to tell a new house from an old one.

We drive off, rest and refreshed. Parshuram asks the jeep driver to travel further north. The sand from the dunes has washed over the road in many places, completely obscuring it. Its easy for even a heavy vehicle like the jeep to skid off the road and get stuck in the sand on either side. My driver cautiously slows down when he sees the road disappears under sand – he's been through



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the getting stuck bit before. Its fine sand, white mixed with the brown mud of the plains that becomes clayey and hard with a little water. A little water is enough for people to eke a single crop in a year from the earth.

The sky has acquired a steely hue; it's blazing hot and the road shimmers in the heat. The sand dunes – more low hills than dunes – seem to be so permanent that the road snakes over them rather than around them. Cresting one, I spot a dust devil in the near distance. The whirl of sand rises several hundred feet in the hot still air and dances on and off the road, tempting us to run it over. The landscape is pretty barren with brownish sand stretching away on either side. The slopes of the dunes have sand eddies, where the wind, rather than water, has swept sand and deposited it in a microcosm of the sand dune.

In the shimmering afternoon heat of 3 o'clock, we set out east towards Chirawa, the point of origin of the Dalmias. The Dalmias are cement barons now, but began, like most of the seths of Shekhawati, as traders. The men used to travel to Calcutta and Bombay and return home a few times a year. They had built schools in Chirawa many years ago, one for boys and another for girls; both are very well attended.

Mr Raghu Hari Dalmia, who heads OCL India Limited, leans forward in this comfortable chair, seated in his small office in Delhi. The wall behind him has a family tree of the Dalmias. He recalls, "Shekhawati used to be a sandy desert when I used to visit it as a child, perhaps once a year. Later I noticed the place had more greenery and when I spoke with farmers, they said they had tapped groundwater for agriculture. However, water levels had been falling for many years. I realized that if this wasn't checked, the place would once again revert to desert.

"My family has been involved in education for many years through the Dalmia Trust. I was asked to take charge of the Trust's affairs. In 2004, I met Rajinder Singh of Tarun Bharat Sangh, a non-profit organization working on soil conservation and water harvesting in Alwar. We met in Delhi where he introduced me to Niranjan Singh."

The first step they all felt was to provide drinking water to people, the second to arrest the falling groundwater levels and the third to restore greenery to the region.

"Rajinder Singh suggested that I build a rooftop rainwater harvesting system in the schools because they have large roofs," says Raghu. This was the low hanging fruit and showed the Dalmias were willing to put money where their mouth was. Both the schools got a system that now meets their toilet-water needs. Pipes from the roof collect at a point, run underground to a tank in the corner of the playground. The tank is essentially a covered concrete well.

In the late afternoon, the Dalmia school stands silent and empty. The elderly chowkidar lets us in and we walk through the high hallway to the playground at the back. Parshuram points to the far corner of the field where a large cylindrical cement structure stands – the storage well. From the well, I see the white and blue plastic pipes leading off the roof and into the ground, and eventually coming up to the well to discharge the water collected on the roof. Exiting, I am fascinated by a large brass statue of Saraswati, the goddess of learning, in the school.



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Rainwater harvesting has reduced the amount of groundwater being pumped up; its also more potable than groundwater in many places in Shekhawati. The immediate aim, then, is to reduce dependence on groundwater.

Building new tankas and talabs is part of Raghu Dalmia's strategy; the other bit is to repair what has been around for centuries. There are literally thousands of tankas, bawdis, talabs, johads and kunds in Shekhawati. The rule of thumb is – the older, the worse off is the structure. But the fact remains that these could supply a fair percentage of the region's water needs, if they were restored and looked after.

“It would cost many millions to build new kunds and talabs but only a few hundreds of thousands to repair and look after the old ones,” says Raghu. He has a multi-step approach to making his part of Shekhawati green. The first is providing for drinking water. The second is giving tanka-owners saplings of local tree species to plant on their fields. The third is changing agriculture patterns so people grow crops that are locally suitable. The fourth is making an alliance of the Panchayats in Chirawa that will strengthen local efforts. Finally, he wants to make the seasonal Katli river, that flow through three districts in Shekhawati, a perennial river. These are long-term plans, but Raghu is in for the long haul.

The town of Churu lies about 90 km north-west of Jhunjhunu. Its more famous for the pretty painted havelis, or mansions, of the seths of old. Most seths have gone, swallowed by the sands of time. Their descendants live in distant cities and seldom come back. The streets of Churu are broken, covered with a thick layer of sand that has been moistened by water tankers to keep it from flying into houses and shops. Sewers overflow, pigs wallow in the black gutters, cows chew the cud in the middle of narrow streets and cycle rickshaws threaten to drive my jeep off the road. We're actually passing through, looking for a johad outside Churu. I see a beautiful haveli, its façade and paintings in good repair, and we stop.

The caretaker is out but his wife obligingly lets us in. The entrance is through a low door cut in the main wooden gate, studded with brass stakes, to the courtyard. The courtyard has a covering of chicken-wire mesh to keep birds off the priceless paintings. All the walls of the courtyard and the surrounding rooms are covered with hand-drawing of gods and goddesses.

Navneeta Sharma, the caretaker's wife, says, “The house is about 300 years old. The owner had appointed my husband's family as the caretaker. He comes once in a few years. We have been looking after this place. We have lived here for nearly 250 years.”

That makes her family the virtual owner of the mansion. Her husband, she says, isn't interested in making it into a hotel to earn money, rather than spending money on looking after the rambling house. Then, she invites us into the inner courtyard that's bigger and even more elaborately painted.

“I've restored some of these panels myself. We cannot do very much because its only my daughter and myself who stay here all the time and it's a large house. It takes me two hours to clean one portion of the house.”



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It sure is. Three sides of the inner courtyard are surrounded by three-storied buildings, the walls of which are also painted, but the paintings have faded. The soot from years of cooking in the courtyard has obscured many paintings. The plaster has fallen off in other places, to be replaced by cement. The family has locked up all but what is needed for them on the ground floor. Navneeta is around 45 and lacks the energy to run up and down the house, looking after it. The atmosphere is one of splendid decrepitude. Some mansion-owners have had the good sense to cash in on their assets – they have made them into hotels and charge a pretty packet for 'heritage holidays'. I take photos to my heart's content, though Navneeta does say that others charge even for taking pictures.

Rani Ka Talab, a large pond surrounded by a palace on one side and walls on the other sides, is one of Churu's larger water collection structures. It was built, like all these monuments, several centuries ago. There are five stories inside; the façade is the top floor. When the talab is full, the two lowest stories are under water. This keeps the palace, and presumably the Sethani, cool in Shekhawati's long hot summer. There are canopied platforms that jut out from the palace – in these, the ladies of the city could bathe in privacy. For the commoners, there are platforms arranged around the other three walls of the talab. The palace is made of brick, the rest of the talab from sandstone.

Hanuman Prasad, my guide in the Churu region, says, "The talab has never dried up. But the water level is low because it's not rained properly for two years."

Not just that, the catchment area of the talab does not exist anymore. What was open ground from where water would flow into the talab is now under housing.

Amla Ruia, wife of the owner of Phoenix Mills in Mumbai Ashok Ruia, runs her trust in Ramgarh. It's a few kilometres south of Churu. Ramgarh is an extremely dusty town. We drive through narrow dusty lanes and up a long street, ankle deep in dust. Water tankers have converted the dust to slush. On both sides are double-storied buildings, their top storeys still covered with lovely paintings. The paintings depict life in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when these buildings were probably made. Sadly, the buildings are overhung with wires. Where the plaster has fallen, because nobody bothers to look after the buildings, not even the owners, ugly graying-brown patches of cement have taken over. Elsewhere along the half kilometre stretch, signboards obscure the paintings. I look at the slush and try to forget the blasphemy.

"I was moved by the plight of the people of Ramgarh during the 1999 drought. I came out of my shell to try and help them. But the people refused. They had become so used to water on tap, that the government supplied from the Indira Gandhi Canal, that they could not understand what I was offering them. I wanted their cooperation," she reminisces, sitting one evening outside the Tarun Bharat Sangh ashram. Dressed in a blue chikan kurta, draped with tasteful costume jewellery, the grey-haired Amla looks every bit the lady of a large house. But she switches roles between that and her work in the dusty lanes of Ramgarh with ease.

Amla returned to Mumbai, disillusioned. She commissioned an expert Sanjeev Bamru to design a project for the region. In due course, Sanjeev produced a plan worth Rs. 10 million but Amla





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was reluctant to back it without seeing things for herself. Her sister, who had heard of Rajinder Singh, president of TBS, suggested that she have him whet the plan.

“I couriered the plan to him and spoke to him a week later in March 2001. He rejected it out of hand because it said nothing about involving local people. To understand what community participation means, I visited TBS and persuaded Rajinder to visit Ramgarh,” says Amla.

After all this, she set up the Ramgarh Vikas Trust and focused on building tankas because drinking water was in short supply in villages around Ramgarh. She found the people in villages to be much more responsive than the townspeople. Over the past three years, Amla's trust has made more than 150 tankas in these villages. Ramgarh, on the other hand, continues to be the very picture of dereliction.

At one end of the market road is the Ruia haveli; at the other is a splendid painted well. It was part of a complex with a temple, haveli and step well. All that's left now are the remains of the well. Under the cenotaph atop the well are faded frescoes of horses and elephants. The haveli next to the well must have been also richly painted once, but only the ones under the eaves are still visible; the rest have faded in the desert sun. Dust covers everything – even the paintings on the walls of the havelis.

I enter the Ruia haveli through a high iron gate. There is a narrow courtyard to the left; to the right is a verandah with lots of thick mattresses with white cotton covers and bolsters for visitors to recline on. The roof is richly painted. Narender Singh, who I have been referred to, isn't there. I explain what I am doing to another man, who agrees to show the tankas after lunch. Lunch time is sacred, even here in the middle of the desert where people eat their first meal at around 11 and the evening one at sundown.

We leave in the jeep for a village outside Ramgarh. What strikes me about the Ramgarh region is that nearly all villages have piped water. The 15 foot high concrete cylindrical water tanks, into which water is piped every day or every other day from the Indira Gandhi Canal in north Rajasthan, have become part of every village's landscape, as much as wells used to be before. They are the new social centres, where women and children congregate to fill water pitchers. It's still the women who do this, despite the proximity of water sources. Men would not be caught dead filling water pitchers.

At a tank, there is a riot – of colours. Rajasthani women in sarees in bright pink, red and orange throng the trough of a tank with their plastic pitchers. To the left, under the eave of a paan shop, the men of the village while away their time. As I train my camera on the women, they too beg to be photographed. At the next village, the pipe feeding the tank has burst; a black rubber hose tied to the burst helps people water and wash their animals while the trickle going into the tank seems to suffice for people.

In the midst of this seeming bounty, is building tankas just a way to appease a conscience. After all, getting water out of tankas takes effort, something that getting water out of a tank through a tap does not take. The tankas that Amla's trust builds are somewhat costlier, at Rs. 32,000 apiece, than those built by Dalmia's trust.



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“It’s the management,” says Niranjana. I leave the issue at that.

Niranjana says building tankas even where there is piped water supply is necessary. “The government scheme is erratic. Sometimes, people go for several days without water because of a leak in the main pipe. Then they realize the value of the tanka system. We need to mobilize the communities to look after their water sources and not rely on external agencies. Then, restoring or building a tanka entails a one-time cost while government water supply schemes have a recurring cost.”

Also, he claims that building tankas binds the community, while piped water systems divide the people.

But most of the tankas seem to be built outside villages, in the fields. It does make life for farmers easy as they don’t need to take water with them when they go to the fields. But in the villages, it is piped water that rules, as it does in Ramgarh. Despite that, people are more than willing to participate in building tankas. Tankas supplied water in villages also in times gone by, as evidenced by two gigantic tankas I saw in Bhutia and Devas villages. These incredibly large, but incredibly decrepit tankas had circular catchments with a pretty dome in the centre. Both were black with age and neglect.

Parshuram sees them and says, “They were made by the village seth several decades ago. But since piped water came to the village, they have been neglected. Also, they are too large for the village community to maintain on their own. Nobody makes lime mortar anymore so repairing is also difficult.”

All in all, a losing proposition. But I think, “Building new tankas is more profitable for all concerned than restoring old ones.” It seems to be general pattern and Niranjana dodges my question on repairing old tankas, saying they don’t have the expertise to do so. It’s not very convincing because each of these old tankas would hold an estimated 100,000 litres of water, so litre for litre, this water would be cheaper than a new one.

Even Dalmia, whose trust Niranjana manages, has no definite answer to restoration of old tankas and johads, save for a “they must be saved”.

Beed Ka Johad stands abandoned about 10 km from Ramgarh. Its walls appear orange in the setting sun. In the centre of the johad is a puddle of greenish water. It’s a large, very elaborate johad, some 70 or 80 years old, about 200 feet to a side. But nobody uses it anymore even though there is enough water to support a village’s needs for most of the year. There is goat shit on the steps leading down to the water and the reason is not hard to see – a herd of goats drink water from the johad where once only people were allowed. A few thousand rupees would have restored it to pristine condition.

Udaipurvati about 85 KM south of Jhujhunu is a hilly region of Shekhawati. There is plenty of greenery en route Udaipurvati and the road is clear of sand, unlike on the drives to Churu and Chirawa. I see a few tankas in the fields and near villages; Niranjana says there are more inside



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villages. However, groundwater is available in plenty. Seeing an abundance of tubewells, I wonder how for long. The fields are lush with crops – vegetables mostly. There are trees of different species and plenty of shrubs. The hardy Khejri is also there, faring much better here than further north. Fortunately there is little keekar and more desi babul.

We get to Godia village, at the foothills of the Khetri hills, that are an offshoot of the Aravallis. We pass through the village and the scenery changes. Its sandy and dry, the familiar feeling of Shekhawati is back. Niranjan tells the driver to take the jeep up the floor of a sandy gully between two very scrubby hills. We reach firmer ground and he parks. The sand is thick and soft underfoot and its bordering on hot. Climbing up the gully, I round a bend and its gets noticeably greener; the greenery gets denser and we stop at wall of stones and mud.

“This is a johad we had built a year ago to recharge the groundwater in this region. There is another further up,” says Sitaram, an elderly resident of Godia village. “Before this johad was built, rainwater ran down the gully and flowed away. Now, it seeps into the ground. We have more water in our wells in the village.”

This despite scanty rains since the johad was built. The bed of the johad has a little puddle of water from the last rains – the rest is dry and cracked. The trees around it are new growth, not more than a few years old. Their shade is welcome in the midday heat. Sitaram offers to take me up to the other johad, about a KM up the gully but I politely refuse his offer; its too hot and I've seen johads before.

Johads mean different things in different parts of India. Here, in the hills of Udaipurvati, they are crescent-shaped or straight walls. A core of stones covered with mud – the stones are the foundation and the mud wall holds the water. They work best in semi-arid areas where rainfall is scanty but intense when it happens. The low walls stop a lot of water but seldom break because they are low, usually less than 10 feet high. The water percolates into the ground over weeks and months, recharging the aquifer. The Khetri hills once had many such johads but most have broken. The couple above Godia are part of a new initiative to “catch rainwater where it falls and let it percolate into the ground”.

The dust bowl that is Shekhawati has lessons. Its sandy soil has produced a great many of India's industrialists. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, all of them left and went to seek fame and fortune in the big cities. They became industrialists from traders. Some returned to plough back profits into social activities – schools, hospitals, temples and recently, water harvesting. Water harvesting was once the main philanthropic activity. The wealthy built tankas to store rainwater; they seldom dug wells because the groundwater was saline, and it still is. The wealthy also built johads so that people would have enough water to drink, as well as to wash and bathe in. Animals could get what was left. Water followed life and where it dried, life moved on. The myriad pillars of abandoned wells dotting the Shekhawati desert, like upstretched arms asking for rain, are testimony to the amount of work that these people's ancestors put in, and the indifference with which the current generation treats its inheritance. All the wells are dry; the johads store water from the last rains. But there aren't humans to drink the water anymore – just the pigeons and crows. A dead eagle, lying belly-up outside the Beed Ka Johad, seems to say “If its old, let it rot”.