

**ENGAGING BISHNOI COMMUNITY  
FOR  
CULTURAL TOURISM IN RAJASTHAN**



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***"Seeing heaven in a grain of sand is not a trick only poets can  
accomplish"***

***Clifford Geertz***

***The Interpretation of Culture, 1973:44***

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# PREFACE

Tourism marketing across the world is increasingly relying on its synergy with culture. Sustainability has been one of the major concerns of tourism studies. These areas of attention led to a conference on Cultural Heritage Tourism and Sustainable Development by the SAARC Cultural Centre, Colombo. I was asked to make a presentation on Rajasthan tourism. It appeared to be a simple task as Rajasthan is one of the most attractive tourist destinations of India.

I assumed that presenting cultural heritage of Rajasthan, being the dominant tourism trope, shall be easier than tackling sustainable development. As it turned out, the cultural heritage of Rajasthan as royal history alone was only a market strategy of tourism. The exploration of many other possible facets of cultural tourism of Rajasthan led me to a unique eco-community – 'Bishnoi'.

The Bishnois follow a sustainable lifestyle combating the challenges of desert topography. They represent a culture of ecological balance. I realized that in all my presentations talks, lecture, informal discussions, the Bishnois invariably attracted people more than any other facet. Perhaps, the interest emanated from contemporary relevance in the wake of global environmental crisis. I could see definite possibilities of Bishnoi tourism and it excited me a great deal. As I delved deeper into the Bishnoi culture, I was mesmerized by the pleasant contrast they created in the midst of Thar Desert through community effort. It was a learning experience for me and I am sure many others would like to participate in it. This turned into a quest to make tourism much more meaningful. For quite a few of us “It is not worth the while to go around the world to count the cats in Zanzibar.” (Thoreau: *Walden*)

As much as I was enthralled by the Bishnoi culture, I was also fascinated by the emerging concerns in tourism studies. Earlier tourism was a way to realize myth and fantasy whereas now an authentic experience had become a significant objective. Culture was also being redefined in more participatory, plural and democratic terms. The interests of the tourists and the hosts were to be shielded from commercial manipulation. It was

whole new paradigm of tourism before me. I confess to being dazzled by eco-tourism, community-based tourism, and creative tourism as different trajectories of cultural tourism. As I interacted more with the Bishnoi community and the tourists, I was glad to have forayed into new tourism that imbues justice, fairness and equity. The social concerns of an economic enterprise seemed essential for developing Bishnoi tourism. It made my work more meaningful and fulfilling on a personal level but also led to a better tourism model.

The book begins with the concerns of Bishnoi tourism as a part of the cultural heritage of Rajasthan. It seeks to locate the community and its livelihood as a viable destination for cultural tourism. After discussions on cultural tourism, community engagement in the context of Rajasthan, the study moves into a detailed description of the Bishnoi ethos. The ideology, practice and activism of the Bishnois as the first environmentalists of the world, in its continuity, emerge as nothing short of a marvel in the present era of consumerism. The existing tourism models are then examined and the proposed modes experimented. The role of community tourists and marketing leads to interesting modes to satisfy varied interests. Bishnoi tourism leads to an exciting travel destination which abounds in both entertainment and education. The report posits possible tourism models warning against pitfalls, challenges and limitations.

I am extremely grateful to the SAARC Cultural Centre Colombo for awarding me a research grant to conduct a work that gave me the opportunity to be a long term tourist with the amazing community of the Bishnois. I am extremely grateful to numerous, unnamed villagers of Rajasthan whose guileless hospitality completely melted my heart. And I owe that experience to my best friend, my husband and now a fellow researcher, Kartikeya Misra. He took me along to the Bishnoi areas for his own research. There are many friends and colleagues who not only put up with my obsession with the Bishnois but also enriched them with their own interpretations. I can't name and thank them all. I had to be away and isolated to write this report and I am grateful to my two bosses for affording me that luxury. My father Mr Ashok Chaturvedi, heading the domestic front, was uncomplaining and rather proud, which made me beam. Professor Vibha Upadhyay, Director, Centre for Museology and

Conservation University of Rajasthan was a rare combination of patience and encouragement. My one ambition in life is to be a boss like her.

The present crisis of climate change and environment is unfortunately real and huge. This project is also an effort to address it through the wisdom of Bishnois and create a tourism model with a fusion of education and entertainment. I present before you this report with an anticipation that hopefully is not misplaced in its optimism.

*Neekee Chaturvedi*

*Jaipur, India*

## Chapter I

# **BISHNOIS AS TOURISM ATTRACTION OF RAJASTHAN**

*Marupradesh* is the more popular name for the region of western Rajasthan in India. It means the land of desert in local parlance. The topographical features comprise of shifting sand dunes, sparse vegetation, and scarce water resources. These stark features are enlivened by sporadic habitations, mellifluous melodies, and bright ensembles. Life in a desert is far from easy and the native communities invariably evolve and adapt unique coping strategies. The potent combination of desert topography with its livelihood mechanisms makes up for a heady mixture for cultural tourism.

The Bishnoi Community, focus of this study, is completely committed to the ecological ethics. The Bishnois manifest not only desert livelihood but also a welcome contrast to threatening images of global environmental crisis. The story of how I chanced upon this paradox is also the story of the inception of this project.

While traversing the harsh terrain of western Rajasthan during the blazing summer heat of the month of April, accompanying my husband for his research, I got an opportunity to visit remote villages. I was a kind of touristy companion to places that have never even been considered for a spot on Rajasthan's tourist map. Despite the climatic extremes, stark scenery, uncharted terrains, minimal hospitality mechanism, my experience turned out to be more than worthwhile. Even in touristic terms I gained a plethora of delightful experiences. One episode stands out and should be narrated at the outset.

While surveying the water conservation efforts of the desert villages (the topic of my husband's Ph D thesis), we came across many community-maintained

water reservoirs. Unfortunately, most of the ponds suffered from lack of maintenance. Due to lack of rainfall, they hardly stored any water. Having fallen into disuse, they were camouflaged by wayward thorny bushes. My untrained eyes were quite often unable to identify some of them without the aid of our local guides. To me the dried out ponds were no more than a slight depression in the arid expanse. Walking across the village periphery in a district called Phalaudi, I was photographing these remnants of traditional water harvesting structures. In this academic tour, I was assigned the duty of a photographer and an interlocutor in conversation with rural women. Rajasthan, still steeped in tradition, has its own codes of men-women interaction.

Following our jottings from a village elder, we crossed the road to expect another ill-kempt, semi-dried pond. Just as we reached the other side of a sandy hill, we watched in amazement a large water reservoir, brimming with clean and sparkling water. The shady trees, the peacock sounds, and the beauty of a camel guzzling water to quench his thirst added to its spectacular beauty. This man-made oasis was startling as well as soothing in an otherwise dreary landscape. Upon further inquiry, it came to light that this water body was maintained by the Bishnoi community, who were known to unfailingly labour every new-moon night for its upkeep. Every man, woman and most children contributed fortnightly to this cause like a sacred duty. It had turned out to be a touching spectacle. The background story was compelling enough to make me rethink about the established tourism trajectories in the context of Rajasthan. Before we discuss Bishnois as an alternative tourism trajectory, let us dwell a little on the three key terms - ‘Engaging Bishnoi Community’, ‘Cultural Tourism’, and ‘Rajasthan’.

I shall discuss these in reverse order and begin with Rajasthan and its place of pride in tourism. Rajasthan is part of ‘the golden triangle’ of Indian tourism. Rajasthan is one of the most popular tourist destinations in India, for both



domestic and international tourists. It is estimated that every third international tourist coming to India visits Rajasthan. Even a cursory glance at tourism promotional sites makes it clear that Rajasthan is a land of forts and palaces with a sprinkling of a desert safari experience. This (re)discovery of a mesmerising folk culture in the interiors of the place, far removed, both spatially and culturally from the projected regal magnificence led me to explore tourist production of cultural heritage of Rajasthan.<sup>1</sup>

This work aimed to incorporate multiple identities of Rajasthan as a tourist destination to amend a skewed (mis)representation. The image of Rajasthan presented in the tourism market relies heavily on the royal metaphor of a bygone era. The region has many other identities which are completely shrouded in such a static representation. Through this analysis, different faces of the region reflected in folk religion, in the sustainable livelihoods of folk communities or in the interaction with contemporary concerns were found to be completely neglected. Therefore, their amalgamation into alternative tourism trajectories to make available a more wholesome palette of cultural heritage of the region and its various communities seemed a better option.

One of the trajectories it opened was exploring the tourism possibilities of the sustainable livelihoods of folk communities of Rajasthan, particularly the Bishnois. It would be worthwhile to understand the more generally accepted image of Rajasthan in tourism circuit.

### **Discussion of the Problem**

The Bishnoi community concentrates mainly in the western parts of Rajasthan, known largely for its desert landscape in the touristic idiom. The Bishnoi sect

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the regional seminar of SAARC Cultural Centre, 28-19 April 2014  
[http://saarcculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/book-of-abstract\\_chtsd.pdf](http://saarcculture.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/book-of-abstract_chtsd.pdf) last accessed on 30/04/2016

was founded by Guru Jambheshwar in the middle of the fifteenth century. The community follows the tenets that manifest a deep ecological concern. More important than their religious affiliation are their livelihood practices. These practices originate in the context of indigenous arid climate but the unequivocal emphasis on a symbiotic relationship with nature, plants and animals and conserving natural resources rings a contemporary bell. Though the beliefs of the Bishnois are rooted in the *dharmic* notions preserved in some vernacular scriptures, they can play the role of harbingers of ‘ecological sanity’ in ‘our global predicament’. Developing tourism in such a way that it encapsulates the social meaning and ordinary activities of the Bishnois in their natural setting can be a way to achieve this lofty goal.

Rajasthan is a popular tourist destination owing to its unique topography and rich history and folk culture. Cultural tourism is becoming more and more popular (OECD Report), which is described as “the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs.” Developing cultural tourism through Bishnois shall rely on the less tangible aspects of values and worldview in their natural environ, making the tourist experience authentic and palatable. The biodiversity of the desert state of Rajasthan is managed not by human isolation but by active human participation. The Bishnoi community is a significant case in the point. Showcasing their culture through tourism seems beneficial and pertinent from the point of view of tourism industry, tourists, the Bishnois and cultural theorists.

The project was envisaged to attempt

- To situate the cultural ‘ethos’ of the Bishnois in the larger cultural context.
- To devise a sustainable tourism model based on the Bishnoi culture
- To work out a balance between delicate nuances of culture and tourism marketing
- To facilitate the community participation in such a model

- To interact with policy formulators, tourism industry stake holders and non-Governmental Organisations

In a nutshell, the project explores the possibilities of showcasing ecological livelihood of the Bishnois of Rajasthan as a cultural tourism model, to serve as a unique avenue of environmental restoration.

The research problem is important as it would strengthen tourism in Rajasthan by representing and popularising a unique facet of its cultural heritage. It would also serve to sustain the heritage and culture amidst the onslaughts of globalisation and homogeneity.

The culture of Bishnois has not been prolifically researched. Scholars have limited themselves to their spiritual ecology. Some tourism efforts have been very limited in their approach. Therefore, a comprehensive research with academic rigueur leading to practical implications to make possible the development of cultural tourism is very pertinent. Its objectives can be summarized to arrive at -

- A reliable and comprehensive record of Bishnoi ecological culture
- Model(s) of cultural tourism of the Bishnois
- Suggestions for policy formulators
- Facilitate community participation in work plan for tourism

The limitation of the study has been that it was limited to a few areas and could not explore all the districts with sizeable Bishnoi population. Further, the idea of forming a co-operative society to involve community members could not be delved into deeper. Formulation of bylaws for such a society was proposed but was not completed in time as discussions between the different stake holders have been taking longer time than expected.

## **Methodology**

As a qualitative research, data were gathered from documents and literature related to culture and history of Bishnois. Theoretical writings and case studies pertaining to tourism were also made use of for contextualizing the research. The culture and history of Bishnois have been examined through their scriptures, vernacular literature and their portrayal in British census reports to take note of diverse interpretations. Newspapers and court proceedings were explored as they record the activism of Bishnois to protect trees and environment in present times.

There was a lot to learn about religious sites, habitations, and way of living of the Bishnois that entailed field research including the techniques of participant observation, non-participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focused group discussions.

This study benefitted a lot from open-end interviews of key informants and other members of the community. The informants have rather varied profiles including persons who live in tourism area, especially the Bishnois, entrepreneurs (including persons with tourism business in the region and nearby), government sector officials (including persons working for the government related to tourism management in Rajasthan), and tourists (including persons who travelled to Bishnoi clusters).

Group discussion and questionnaires filled through purposive sampling with Bishnoi families in select villages with an effort to include common people and women too. Unstructured observation and informal interviews were also helpful in understanding the way of life. The Bishnois can be found in the Hissar and Sirsa district of Haryana and Abhor and Fazilka of Punjab, in Uttar Pradesh, in Gujarat, in Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Mumbai. Though Pali, Jalore, and Sirohi

also have considerable Bishnoi population, their concentration in Rajasthan is especially in the districts of Jodhpur, Bikaner, Barmer. All the field work for this study was limited to these three districts, with special focus on Bikaner and its nearby areas where sacred Bishnoi sites are located. Pilot tourism models were executed with the help of acquaintances and interested hosts and guests to get some sense of viability.

### **Tourist Production of Cultural Heritage of Rajasthan**

Rajasthan is a popular destination for tourists and its main attraction is its rich cultural heritage. The tourism models generally equate cultural heritage of Rajasthan with its impressive array of forts, palaces and temples. Though Rajasthan has not remained untouched by an escalation in the tourist impulses giving rise to explorations in many other areas but these attempts have remained marginal and limited. It can safely be said that Rajasthan attracts tourists for its historical legacy and representative monuments. The region weaves together history, culture and geographical backdrop to create desirable spaces. The effervescent monuments, folk art, desert landscape seem to be the core components.

Though there is a large influx of tourists, it would be pertinent to examine the popular touristic projection of the cultural heritage accounting both for what it includes and what is left out. The regional context of marketing strategies needs to be revisited to explore spaces for new interpretations.

The promotional devices (re)produce an endless stream of images and textual descriptions which inform (or create) notions of place at a distance that are not mediated by what lies outside the photographic frame and may be apprehended by others in it. The tourist circuit is a reflection of an 'orientalist' imagery of India and the (re)presentation of Rajasthan is an epitome of that imagery. Such an orientation in creating a perception stems from fantasies about romance, decadence, sensuality and the unfathomable. The tourist production of Rajasthan has been deeply reliant on such

narrative tropes and fantastic images of regal magnificence. In fact, Rajasthan appears as a distillation of Indian-ness in which visions of an unchanging culture, sweeping sand dunes, elephants, bejeweled tribal women, elaborate royal palaces and notions of decadent luxury persists.

(Henderson, et al, 2007: Foreword, xvii)

This type of an image creation and its perpetuation raises a few pertinent issues. The key focus of Rajasthan tourism, the royalty, supposedly embodied by romantic Rajputs has significant representational impact. It leads to a neglect of significant features of the frequented sites, obscures multiple other sites, shrouds variant cultures and identities to be found in the state. Tourists continue to tour the palaces of maharajas, sample the camel safaris, revel in staged folk performances and retrieve souvenirs of specific craft objects. This dominant image of Rajasthan plays a crucial role in determining the pathways and directions of the tourist footfall. The picture that emerges for the tourists might not be an adequate representation of cultural reality. MacCannell (1976:94) writes rather too bluntly that “The term ‘tourist’ is increasingly used as a derisive label for someone who seems content with his obviously inauthentic experience.”

The royal insignia bestowed upon Rajasthan in the tourist discourse is not entirely a charade. Firstly, Rajasthan has a historical background of majestic opulence in the regal princely states, where the Rajput community wielded political and military authority. This historical fact may under-represent the subalterns but was a dominant strain in times when history-writing was largely limited to political and dynastic narration. The success of such branding in tourism is no surprise as it contrasted well with the modern, urbane background of tourists. In the experiences of the tourists some encounters with the imperial culture have been created artificially but there are also completely authentic and concrete representations in historical monuments, even if they present only one

aspect. Secondly, one also cannot be overly critical of this approach as it works successfully in market economy. The tourism market is highly competitive and marketability is a ruthless criterion. Thirdly, this representation does not strike a dissonant chord with the people of Rajasthan, where royalty as a produced reality is seen with affection, pride and interest. There are many instances where the natives begrudge the skewed portrayal of their homeland in the tourism brochure but in Rajasthan, there is little or no hostility over the perpetuation of an image imbued with royal splendour. There is very little local protest over the royal epithets in public life. The imperial metaphor is perpetuated in the popular culture, unscrupulously making appearances in films and television shows. The cricket fans would effortlessly recall that the Indian Premier League Cricket team from Rajasthan was named Rajasthan Royals.

Nevertheless, this creation or manipulation of the image of Rajasthan has a wider impact. The sites appearing in guide books as centres of cultural heritage of Rajasthan are simply markers of a touristic universe conjured up on the basis of the pragmatic dictates of the market. Barthes (1972:6) remarks perceptively that "...travel guidebooks are actually instruments of blind". In searching for image and identity in the representation, one cannot neglect the links between power and knowledge. Foucault (Morris, 1970) and Braudrillard (1983) have written at length about these processes. These are also relevant to the tourism industry. An understanding of the existing pattern of tourist branding of Rajasthan may help in reshaping the social impact of tourism.

### **Inventing and Re-inventing Heritage**

The first point of entry for a tourist visiting India is usually the golden triangle of Delhi-Jaipur-Agra. "This interconnectedness of the three cities conjures up a series of interrelated spaces and times that foreground Muslims, princely, architectural and medieval themes which might neglect the present and other

historical eras, lower class groups and non-religious and non-royal architecture.” (Henderson et al 2007: Foreword, xvii) Perhaps its present political position as the capital of Rajasthan puts Jaipur at an advantage even though historically it was at best only one of the four most prominent princely states. This has resulted in development of more heritage sites in Jaipur than other cities. The regional bias contributes far less than the ideological framework of heritage invention. Select monuments, like the forts, palaces and temples, representing regal era are highlighted but some crucial aspects of the heritage of Rajasthan are conspicuous by their absence.

Rajasthan has always faced water scarcity which turns into a formidable difficulty in blazing summers. The state is dotted with traditional step-wells called *Baori*, which do not find a worthy mention in the heritage tourism discourse. They are usually built through community efforts, patronised by merchants, meant to serve large populace and are architectural marvels. There are at least two *Baoris* in the vicinity of Jaipur, at Bhandarej (Figure 1) and at Abhaneri (Figure 2) that have not received deserved attention. Although, there was some spotlight on Abhaneri, where the popular Indian cinestars Shahrukh Khan’s film *Paheli* (released in June, 2005) was shot. It did not amount to much change in the prevalent setting. One is struck by a neglect of so many identities in the tourism discourse. Thus, a perusal of the process of inventing the heritage identity opens up the possibilities and rationalization for its re-invention.

### **Travel vis-à-vis Tourism**

An early description of the way contemporary culture is now full of re-creations and themed environments was provided by Umberto Eco in *Travels in Hyperreality*. Braudrillard (1994) and Eco (1986) both explain that we create these realistic fabrications in an effort to come up with something that is better



than real – a description that is true of virtually all fiction and culture, which gives us things that are more exciting, more beautiful, more inspiring, more terrifying, and generally more interesting than what we encounter in everyday life.<sup>2</sup> The imagery of international tourism is not for the most part about socio-economic reality at all. It is more about myths and fantasies.

“Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness.” wrote Mark Twain in his bestselling, humour-laden travelogue, *The Innocents Abroad* (Vol. 2: 407). Having said this, he goes on page after page about the daily torture and anxiety involved in foreign travel. A major theme of the book is that of the conflict between history and the modern world. The narrator continually encounters petty profiteering as the motivation behind trivialisations of past but he is also intrigued by seemingly strange selections to represent the past. “Twain serves up the negative, positive and contradictory in a single work.” (Crick, 1989: 307) This statement is a reflection of the ambivalence inherent in the production of cultural heritage to fit the market needs of tourism.

In the early literature, tourism is clearly distinguished from travel. Although Twain wrote at a time when the foundations of the modern travel industry were only being laid, his words ring with contemporary relevance. In the nineteenth century tourism was considered somewhat lowly vis-à-vis travel. Travel was considered pro-active while tourism was seen to be imbued with inherent passivity. In *The Image* Boorstin (1972:91) defines tourism as a form of experience “packaged to prevent real contact with others”. It is in effect “a manufactured, trivial, inauthentic way of being, a form of travel emasculated, made safe by commercialism.” (Boorstin, 1972:109)

Nevertheless tourism gained momentum, changing and evolving; sticking to some old ground rules and embracing new breakthroughs. In the post-industrial

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<sup>2</sup> <http://philosophicalmark.blogspot.in/2006/03/jean-baudrillard-and-umberto-eco-on.html> last accessed on 30/04/2016

era ‘mass tourism’ has emerged. It has reshaped tourism with burgeoning marketing strategies. Despite the rapid expansion in its scope, tourism is still viewed skeptically in terms of its claim of ‘exploring the unexplored’. Fussell (1980:39) puts it bluntly when he says that tourism is “merely about a world discovered (or even created) by entrepreneurs, packaged and then marketed”.

In the context of Rajasthan, one needs to probe about the omission of the urban, the industrial, and the intellectual. One needs to account for economic disparities, social inequalities, and gender inequities instead of shrouding them completely. One way of making Rajasthan tourism more representative can be through showcasing the role common livelihood practices in the cultural heritage of Rajasthan.

### **Cultural Tourism**

Cultural Tourism is the sub-set of tourism concerned with a country or region’s culture and includes tourism showcasing traditions of indigenous cultural communities and their values and lifestyle. This project is more in tandem with this sense of cultural though it has been defined variously. Some studies say that cultural tourism is becoming more popular than standard tourism. “Today cultural tourism seems to be omnipresent and in the eyes of many it may also seem to be omnipotent. It is the holy grail of quality tourism that cares for the culture it consumes while culturing the consumer”. (Richards 2001:1)

With a sudden spurt in its popularity, cultural tourism expanded in meanings, interpretations, and destinations. World Tourism Organization (1958:2) attempts its “all-encompassing’ definition by stating its objective, “to satisfy the human need for diversity, tending to raise the cultural level of the individual and giving rise to new knowledge, experience, and encounter.” OECD<sup>3</sup> report also

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<sup>3</sup> **Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)** is an intergovernmental economic organisation with 35 member countries, founded in 1961 to stimulate economic progress and world trade. It is a forum of countries describing themselves as committed to democracy and the market economy, providing a

highlighted the role that cultural tourism can play in regional development in different world regions.

In the past cultural markers, like monuments and museums, were major tourist attractions. Today cultural tourism includes many popular cultural attractions (Mc Kerscher et al, 2004), sports, living heritage, recent nostalgia, and the “everyday life” of “local” communities. (Howie, 2000) The resources associated with culture have expanded from the largely, fixed, tangible heritage of the past to the mobile, intangible products of contemporary culture. (Richard 2000)

One of the most diverse and specific definitions from the 1990s is provided by ICOMOS<sup>4</sup> (1997): “Cultural tourism can be defined as that activity which enables people to experience the different ways of life of other people, thereby gaining at first hand an understanding of their customs, traditions, the physical environment, the intellectual ideas and those places of architectural, historic, archaeological or other cultural significance which remain from earlier times. Cultural tourism differs from recreational tourism in that it seeks to gain an understanding or appreciation of the nature of the place being visited.”

In addition to the economic importance of culture, its role in establishing and reinforcing identity has also played a big part in growing interest in various aspects of heritage. In particular, as modernity has swept away many traditions and traditional cultural practices, there has been a rush to preserve cultural heritage before it disappears. (Richard, 2001:5) Tourism is also an expression of a relevant potential in terms of communication and cultural integration, two important elements in a world that is ever more global. Therefore, tourism is a way of bringing people together and broadening people’s horizons. (Angeolini, 2013:17) Let us examine some ways in which

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platform to compare policy experiences, seeking answers to common problems, identify good practices and coordinate domestic and international policies of its members.

<sup>4</sup> International Scientific Committee on Cultural Tourism (ICOMOS)

cultural tourism has been defined to arrive at an understanding and perspective that would give direction this study.

“Cultural tourism is an entertainment and educational experience that combines the arts with natural and social heritage and history.” (Cultural Tourism Industry Group<sup>5</sup>)

“Cultural tourism is a genre of special interest tourism based on the search for and participation in new and deep cultural experiences, whether aesthetic, intellectual, emotional, or psychological.” (Stebbins, 1996:948)

So we see that some of the definitions try to focus on the attraction side of this system through either geographical space or experiences or both but fortunately, almost all of them focus on and highlight the role of the local population as well. (Csapo, 2012:204) Thus, cultural tourism not only serves an economic function but also plays an arguably significant role in education, spreading awareness, creating harmony, and aiding conservation of indigenous knowledge. In this context, the role of Bishnoi community and their livelihood in the physical context of the region of Rajasthan acquires great relevance and finds a rationale.

Cultural tourism is an interaction with cultural treasures encapsulated as (a) built and material values (buildings, art forms etc), (b) the cultural values connected to everyday life (free time, leisure, lifestyle, habits, gastronomy, (c) events and festivals. (After Csapo, 2012) The cultural markers of Bishnois are more in consonance with (b) and (c) though they are not bereft of a physical context and therefore, augur well for a wholesome experience of cultural tourism. It would be a fruitful exercise to skim their unique philosophy and culture to contextualize them as a tourist attraction.

### **Engaging Bishnoi Community**

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.culturaltourismvictoria.com.au/> last accessed on 30/04/2016

Some years back, I was invited by an organisation of Jaipur, Indo-German Society, to deliver a lecture on folk traditions of Rajasthan to a group of students from various German universities. In the lecture, we talked about many aspects folk songs, dances, costumes, jewellery, and also folk-religion. As it made no sense to just talk about these cultural epitomes of Rajasthan, the lecture was supplemented by visual images, audio recordings, and video clips. Among other performances and recordings, I showed them a small clipping on a film on Bishnois by Franck Vogel, a French photojournalist specialising in social and environmental issues. *The Bishnois: India's Eco-warriors* (Rajasthan, l'âme d'un prophète) (52 min, France 5, 2011). The film was awarded the Phoenix d'Or 2011 and the Terre Sauvage Award 2013. *Telerama* magazine wrote of it that "If everyone could watch this documentary, the Earth would be better off"<sup>6</sup>.

In October 2013, the filmmaker received the highest recognition by the Bishnoi community for spreading the Bishnoi philosophy. Its storyline wondered how a community has been working tirelessly to protect the environment, even sacrificing their lives to protect the flora and fauna. The film stated its objective as an attempt to understand the priority given by the Bishnois to environment in a land of economic difficulties and to portray how a community shoulders the tradition of environmental responsibility for the future generations.

En Inde, au coeur du désert du Thar, une communauté travaille aussi depuis plus de 500 ans ! Les Bishnoïs vivent en complète symbiose avec la nature, allant jusqu'à sacrifier leur vie pour préserver la faune et les arbres. ...Dans un pays en pleine croissance économique, où l'environnement est loin d'être une priorité, comment sont-ils perçus ? Quel regard portent-ils en retour sur notre monde ? En suivant le destin croisé de plusieurs membres de la communauté Bishnoï, ce film interroge sur la place de l'homme au sein du vivant et sa responsabilité envers les générations futures<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.viaplanetvox.org/evenements/interview-franck-vogel/> last accessed on 8/8/2016

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.telerama.fr/cinema/films/rajasthan-l-me-d-un-proph-te,439720.php> last accessed on 8/8/2016

This film generated a lot of interest among the young scholars I was teaching. They were impressed by the ecological concerns of a largely rural community in the region and wanted to know more about it. After many discussions and e-mail exchanges, some of them actually visited the Bishnoi villages. I could facilitate their travels as I had recently visited these places and made friends.

The inhospitable landscape of Rajasthan is softened by the friendliness of the people in general but the Bishnoi hospitality is almost legendary. These students stayed with their families and came back completely overwhelmed. Some of them reported in e-mails that they had never before witnessed a more symbiotic relationship of man and nature.

There was another group of enthusiastic students who had hired an agency that offered 'Village Tourism' of which Bishnois were a key component. Though they enjoyed their experience but stated that they were a little disappointed as they felt that there are very few Bishnois left. This was also profoundly different from my own and the other group's experience. On further probing, it appeared that the agency had set up a couple of Bishnoi families in relative proximity of established urban tourist centres. In tourism studies this would be called a poor attempt at 'staged authenticity'. (MacCannell, 1973)

Anyway, this experience led me to a validation of the tourism possibilities for the Bishnoi community. It wasn't non-existent as I had initially imagined it to be but what existed was at best inadequate. A fuller, wholesome, more educative model should emerge. The ecological philosophy of the Bishnois, though five hundred years old, has a special relevance for the world today and it deserves a place in tourist attractions of Rajasthan.

### **Changing Climate and the Climate of Change**

The twenty-first century heralded major climatic changes making devastating floods, forest fires, melting glaciers a looming reality. The issue of climate

could no longer be neglected or evaded in the political and economic discourse and the role of human race in it had to be accounted for if the crisis of climate change had to be addressed adequately. This changed the political climate as the consensus emerged that the crisis had to be controlled and concerns arose for man-made cause underlying it. In his seminal essay ‘The Climate of History’, Dipesh Chakrabarty observes that historians will have to revise many of their fundamental assumptions and procedures in this era of human-induced climate change, in which ‘humans have become geological agents, changing the most basic physical process of the earth’ (Ghosh, 2016:12) The present geological era is termed ‘anthropocene’ in recognition of the impact created by man as geological agents.<sup>8</sup>

Now if the scientific consensus is to devolve a considerable part of the responsibility of climatic mishaps on human livelihood, the solution must also be sought within it. Not getting into the complexities of technical language associated with climate change, one aspect that needs to be highlighted is that it needs urgent attention. There is very narrow time frame left for remedial action and if we fail to act, it will be seen ‘the great derangement’ as Amitav Ghosh chooses to call it. He elaborates further that “One of the reasons that the problem of climate change is a ‘wicked’ as opposed to a ‘normal’ problem, however, is time...every year that passes without a drastic reduction in global emissions makes catastrophe more certain.” (Ghosh, 2016:214) The narrative for coping with this crisis must incorporate alternative worldviews. The Bishnoi community is a living example of a worldview that leads to ecologically sustainable livelihood practices. The Bishnois emerge as a fascinating cultural resource in the wake of contemporary concerns of environmental degradation.

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<sup>8</sup> The term was first proposed by two collaborating scientists Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer in 2000:17, later elaborated in *Nature* in 2002:23

The desert landscape may appear enchanting to a visitor but it spells difficulties of livelihood for its inhabitants. A judicious use of scanty resources is a way of life with many communities of Rajasthan. The Bishnoi community, residing in the desert state of Rajasthan in India, creates a unique ecological culture through their daily life practices. The dry and arid topography and the vagaries of monsoon rains have turned them into conservationists.

The Bishnoi community is most densely located in Western Rajasthan, in and around the region where Guru Jambheshvar, its founder was born. This work is an effort to record and contextualise their eco-friendly cultural practices through a textual study of the teachings and extensive fieldwork in Bikaner and Jodhpur Districts of the Rajasthan. These two districts house dense Bishnoi clusters, which sometimes comprise entire villages. The book attempts to trace the sustenance of historical teachings of Bishnois in the context of contemporary environmental concerns. The sensitivity towards environment, deeply embedded in the beliefs and practices, offers promising opportunities for cultural tourism. The research has been oriented towards exploring tourist avenues keeping in mind the irreplaceable nature of cultural resources. Therefore, an engagement of/with the community is sought to enhance heritage and cultural values of Rajasthan.

### **Rethinking Tourist Identity and Stakeholders**

In layman understanding a tourist is seen as a person who expressly comes for the purpose of tourism. Therefore, if we wish to develop Bishnoi tourism in Rajasthan, it should be a part of the conventional tourism circuit. It should be pushed to be a part of the itinerary of the tourist visiting Rajasthan. This notion was somewhat challenged, and pleasantly so, by my experience with the German students. It led to the realisation that 'tourist' is not a monolithic identity. There are people on study programmes, business tours, attending social



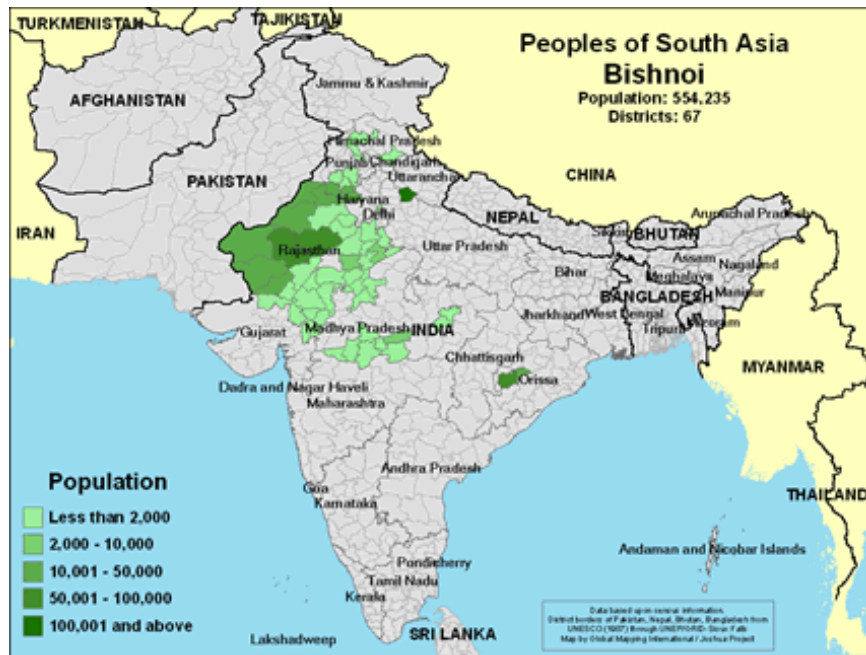
functions etc. who might also be interested in getting acquainted with the culture of Bishnois. Therefore, the multiple and alternative identities of tourists have also been kept in mind while rolling the project – *Engaging Bishnoi Community for Cultural tourism in Rajasthan*.

By now we have established the rationale for engaging the Bishnois in an effort to accommodate different aspects of the cultural heritage of Rajasthan. The compelling uniqueness of Bishnoi community, the context of climate change, and emergence of multiple tourist identities make them an attractive destination of cultural tourism. As a qualitative research, data were gathered from documents and literature related to tourism and culture. The culture of Bishnois was examined through their scriptures, religious sites, habitations etc which prompted the importance of field research including the techniques of participant observation, non-participant observation, in-depth interview and focused group discussions.

The difficulties associated with exposing a traditional community to the tourist gaze was weighing on my mind from the very beginning. It will undoubtedly be a delicate balance but the foremost concern was that the community and the indigenous culture should not be in anyway harmed by participation in the tourism market. Though earlier there was a lot of focus on negative impact of interaction between tourists and communities, there has been a more balanced approach in recent tourism studies whether theoretical and practical.

Several studies in a collection titled *Tourism, Power, and Culture* (Macleod and Carrier, 2010) focus on the positive benefits of tourism and the growing empowerment of local communities. “Globalisation is not always a negative process for local people...In recent years there have been stronger connections between the theories and practice of cultural tourism and sustainable, responsible, ethical and ecotourism. (Smith and Richards, 2013:191-2) With this

community-empowering concept of cultural tourism, let us proceed to know the historical and religious basis of the living culture of the Bishnoi community.



Distribution of Bishnoi Population



Figure 1 The Step-well at Bhandarej, Dausa



Figure 2 Section of a Step-well at Abhaneri, Dausa

## **Chapter II**

### **WHO ARE THE BISHNOIS?**

**B**ishnois, like any other community today, are spread over a large area but they are concentrated in western Rajasthan in areas near the better-known cities of Jodhpur and Bikaner. On my first visit, devoted specifically to be acquainted to the Bishnois, I found that not just Bishnois, their villages are also easily discernible. In the dry, arid zone the Bishnoi villages are lined up with green trees and identified by freely grazing deer. Attracted by this unique trait, and numerous peacocks flanking a cluster of huts, I decided to disembark from my jeep and get a better feel of the picturesque habitation.

As I got down with a few friends and started walking towards some people, the peacocks ran amok or flew away and took shelter behind two men, clad in white overalls in typical Bishnoi fashion. I smiled and said these birds must be familiar with you. They shook their head and said they were visitors like us and added “The animals and birds know their Bishnois.” This fact was established again and again during the course of many field visits. Suitably impressed I was eager to decipher who are the Bishnois, whom even the peacocks and gazelle are able to distinguish.

The Bishnois can be found in the Hissar and Sirsa district of Haryana and Abhor and Fazilka of Punjab, in Uttar Pradesh, in Gujarat, in Madhya Pradesh, Delhi and Mumbai. But their concentration is in Rajasthan especially in the districts of Jodhpur, Bikaner, Barmer. All the field work for this study was limited to these three districts, with special focus on Bikaner and its nearby areas where sacred Bishnoi sites are located. Pali, Jalore, and Sirohi also have considerable Bishnoi population.

Weather conditions in this region can be called extreme. Ninety percent of the rainfall hits the ground between July and August, temperatures in the hottest months of May and June reach 50 Degrees Celsius and violent dust storms can batter the countryside at 140-150km/h. Thar Desert is a forlorn place with vast expanses of sand lined with snake-like patterns. However, sudden spurts of green belts emerge like oasis in the ochre stretch. Invariably, these areas would turn out be inhabited by the Bishnois.

A Google search for the question, “Who the Bishnois are”, supplies an array of sites always alluding to them as environmentalists. Some say they are committed to conservation of nature; others call them doyens of environmental stewardship. They are endowed with lofty epithets as ‘protectors of entire eco-system’ and are even hailed as ‘one of the wonders of the world’. An article opens with the statement “The Bishnoi people show that it is possible for humans to live in harmony with nature even in this modern world.”<sup>9</sup> The relatively recent environmental challenges have brought renewed attention to the Bishnois.

“The Bishnoi of Rajasthan, India, have lately come to the attention of diverse scholarly and activist communities as an example of an ecologically aware people who for generations have been practicing environmental conservation, holistic science, and what today would be termed wise resource management.”<sup>10</sup> (Lal, 2003) But the story of the Bishnois is more dramatic and began much before terms like global warming gained currency or it became fashionable to be an environmentalist.

In the fifteenth century, in north India, in the middle of Thar Desert and plains of Rajasthan, in the arid region of Marwar, a community was devising ways to

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.innovateus.net/innopedia/who-are-bishnoi-people> last accessed on 9/8/2016

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/southasia/Landscapes/ecology/bishnoi.html> last accessed on 9/8/2016

combat the topographic challenges. Irène Frain (2011:15), a French novelist, journalist, and historian, calls Marwar as “Pays de la Mort” or ‘the land of the dead’ in her novel, *The Forest of the 29*, based on the Bishnois. The scarcity of water is the leitmotif of the regional folk songs too. For instance:

*Khen, koḍh, khānsi, dusi, do hāthān kirtār*

*Māraṇ mārag moklā, mah binā mat mār*

(TB, leprosy, cough and cold, you may give us with both hands,

We can be killed in many ways, but don’t kill us without rain)

*Sau sāṇḍiya, sau karahalā, pūta, nipūti hoye*

*Mehadlā to buṭhān hi bhalā, honi ho so oye*

(A hundred she-camels, a hundred camels, all left childless,

What is destined to be will be, even so a few drops of rain would be a blessing)

( Detha n.d. cited in Bharucha 2003:81)

As the folklore goes, at the edge of the desert, the warriors of Rajasthan decided to adorn their empires with outlandish palaces. To erect, they had to feed the lime kilns and fell trees by the thousands. Now, as the Elders had predicted, a terrible drought began to ravage the region. At the heart of the disaster, a humble peasant took a stand. His name is Jambeshwar, or Jambho as he is more popularly known. (Figure 3)

His life is full of many ups and downs, wandering and experiences, hunger and mourning, pride destroyed, wealth lost, love betrayed. But in all the turmoil he seeks the wisdom to make nature bless his people. He realized that the popular perception of drought is a revenge of the god is a fallacy. It is the result of ill-treating and abusing the kindness of nature. With some men and women of good sense, he founded a community that allows the survival of all through the implementation of twenty nine simple principles.

Veneration of trees is the pillar of this community, whose followers took the name "29" in Hindi (20+bis/Bish and 9+nau/noi) : the Bishnoi. Though some scholars trace the origin of the tribe and its name to the worship of the prominent Hindu deity Vishnu (Maheshwari 1970), the Bishnois and their adherence to twenty nine principles is sacrosanct. These 29 principles have not lost their sheen and every Bishnoi, even now, pledges allegiance to them. They go back to the very origin and are associated with the founder himself. Jambho ji or Guru Jambeshwar is the guiding light of the ecological foundations of the Bishnoi community.

### **Guru Jambeshwar – God for Everyday Life**

Rajasthan has several folk gods and goddesses associated with different communities with specialized powers like curing the snake bite, protecting the cattle from disease, resolving infertility etc. Bharucha identifies folk gods and goddesses as “deities who are able to destroy or help you in your daily life.” (2003: 119) They can be approached more directly and play a role in the most ordinary problems of everyday life without indulging into the eschatological mysteries. “Bishnois demonstrate an overlap of religious, personal, and ecological attitudes. “Dharma” is a word used interchangeably both by the founder and the followers of the Bishnoi Community.” (Jain, 2011:51) *Dharma*, though commonly translated as religion, relates more to duty and following the ethical course in common understanding. Jambeshwar promulgated his tenets entirely in consonance with the rigmarole of the routine and thus, enunciated a philosophy of livelihood and action.

Born around 1451-1452 CE to a Panwar Rajput family in the village of Pipasar, Nagaur in the Marwar area of Rajasthan, Jambho ji (as he is popularly known) had an uncommon attachment to nature according to local tradition and vernacular literature. “Some say that he was disenchanted by the struggles over

political power between Hindus and Muslims, and sought ways not only to reconcile them but also to put before them an example of a heightened moral sensibility; others say that a long period of drought moved him to seek protection for all animals and plants.” (Lal, 2003)

The legend attributes his birth to the divine blessings of a saint. His old father Lohat Ji Panwar was deeply saddened by a taunt for not having children up to fifty years of age. Then he performed penance and was blessed by a saint that he will beget a son who will be different from others. His wife Hansa Devi was also blessed by this saint.

Owing to the blessings of saint and on account of his miraculous powers Guru Jambheswar is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnu. It is fabled that as an infant, he did not drink milk from his mother's breast and did not speak in early childhood. As a child, he manifested evident thoughtfulness which attracted people towards him. He also displayed a deeply affectionate bond with animals. He told his first *shabad*, religious teaching in couplet form, (*Guru chinho guru chinh purohit...or recognise the guide, teacher...*) to a teacher who had been called to cure his dumbness. *Shabad* (literal meaning is word or utterances) are the collection of couplets composed by him which contain the essence of his teachings.

The young Jambhdev was simple but genius and kind. He liked loneliness and performed many miracles. He did not marry and used to graze cows. At the age of 34, he left his home and belongings and started preaching at a sand dune called Samrathal Dhora. He was very keen in social welfare and helping others.

In year 1485 there was a worst drought in western Rajasthan area and people started migrating to Malwa (Madhya Pradesh region of India) with their animals. The kind-hearted Jambho ji was sad to see people's pain. He then offered his help to the drought affected people to hold them back. People agreed



and Jambho ji helped them with grain, food, fodder, seed, agriculture accessories, etc. To alleviate the suffering of the people, Guru Jambheswar founded Bishnoi community in year 1485 (Vikram samwat 1542, Krishna 8th of Kartik month) on the sand dune (Samrathal Dhora) after performing *havan* or a fire ritual. Bishnoism was based on main twenty nine principles and best practices taken from Hinduism and Islam. Followers from various professions and different classes accepted Bishnoi faith by taking *pahal* (sacred water).

His way was "*jiya ne jukti aur mariya ne mukti*" which means a meaningful way of living and then liberation after death. He travelled a lot to help and teach people and done many welfare works. He was a true & visionary guru, social reformer, follower of non violence, great environmentalist and believed in love and harmony among not only human beings but also among nature. His teachings are covered by 29 principles, 120 *shabads* and *sandhya mantra*. Many kings and reputed persons came in his contact and admired his teachings. He also helped many of them with his blessings.

Jambho ji passed away in Mukam in Bikaner district, most likely around 1537 AD. His profound humanity, spiritual sincerity, and dedication are believed to have earned him a large following; temples in his honor sprouted over large parts of western Rajasthan. The teachings were very simple, logical, practical and effective. He believed in one god and did not believe in statue worshipping or man worshipping or leaving social responsibilities to achieve god. Therefore, the teachings were pertaining to everyday living and demanded consistent action and allegiance to the broad environmental concerns that he addresses.

### **Ecological Teachings - Survival of the Wisest**

*Sar jāye rūkh rahe to bhī sasto jān*

(If one is able to save a tree even by offering one's own head, it is not a too high a price to pay.)

(A saying attributed to Guru Jambeshwar in the *Shabad* compilation)

The teachings of Bishnois emerged in the wake of a severe drought. The twenty five year old youth refused to reconcile with the despair, hunger and misery that drove people out of their homeland. Jambeshwar decided to stay, but he contemplated deeply about the disaster and came up with a new philosophy. The guiding principle of his teaching was that survival is possible only through a wise and respectful balance of human and nature.

He “accepted the challenge of convincing his fellow men of the blessings of a considerate and caring contact with nature and by that created a new way of thinking. During his many years as preacher he actually succeeded in getting this “green” message across.” (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004: 23) He took it as a mission to spread his teachings that were soon compiled as couplets and songs in local dialect called in collections called *shabads*.

The teachings of this innovative seer (contained in the 29 rules and collection of couplets) are based on social codes of conduct shaped by compassion, simplicity, self-discipline and non-violence. This path of peace is charted out through the core twenty nine tenets of the Bishnois, whose numeric significance has lent the name *Bishnoi*. Out of these twenty nine commandments, eight aim to preserve biodiversity and encourage good animal husbandry. Seven commandments provide directions for healthy social behavior. Ten of these commandments are directed towards personal hygiene and maintaining basic good health. The other four rules are guidelines for worshipping daily. (Bishnoi, 2011:120-122) A descriptive list of these rules is included here as it more or less provides the core of ecological teachings of the Bishnois that enabled their survival in the harsh desert conditions. Let us taste the spring of that ecological wisdom.

## **Twenty Nine Commandments**

*Uṇatīs dharma kī āṅkdī hridaya dhariyo joye*

*Jāmbhojī kripā kari nām Bishnoī hoye*

(One who embraces the twenty nine ethics by heart becomes a Bishnoi by the blessings of Jambho ji)

1. *Sūtāk* - To observe segregation of the mother and newborn for thirty days after delivery. This is followed for preventing of infection to mother and the new-born who are both at a vulnerable stage. The Bishnoi people in informal interviews also say that this is to provide rest to the woman from domestic chores.
2. *Rajaswalā* – To keep a woman away from all activities for five days during her menstrual periods. This again is explained as a means of arranging compulsory rest for the women and was also in consideration with poor hygiene facilities for women in those days or even now in rural pockets.
3. *Snān* – To take early morning bath daily. When we visited some of the sacred Bishnoi sites no questions were raised about our non-Bishnoi identities, whether we were Hindus, Muslim or Christian, we were asked only two questions. First we had to vouch that we had taken a bath before we came and that we had not consumed anything non-vegetarian that day.
4. Cleanliness – To maintain both internal and external cleanliness. Internal cleanliness is achieved through good intentions, humble behavior, keeping jealousy at bay etc.
5. *Dhyān* – To meditate twice a day. Morning meditation to ponder over the proposed activities of the day and to reflect over their harmony with larger life values. Evening meditation is done to take stock of day's activities, to contemplate on the mistakes and shortcomings.
6. *Ārati* – To sing the Lord's glory and his virtues every evening.

7. *Havan* – To offer daily oblation to the holy fire with a heart filled with feelings of welfare, love and devotion – welfare of all living beings, love for nature and whole world, and devotion to the Lord.
8. Food - Use filtered water, milk and carefully cleaned fuel/firewood to make the water and milk bacteria free and to ensure that insects don't get burnt with fire wood.
9. Speech – Filter your speech! Think before you speak.
10. *Khamā* – to be forgiving. Forgiveness can lead one to greatness. Guru Jambheshvar said “If someone comes to you shouting, become cool like water.”
11. *Dayā* – to be compassionate as it purifies the heart. In forgiveness we keep our hearts and mind cool against some external stimuli, whereas in compassion, we imbibe the feelings of the helpless and garner empathy.
12. Non-stealing – Not to steal, cheat or try to own or usurp something that rightfully belongs to another. Theft and deceit are surest means to gather dust on soul and character.
13. *Nindā* – Not to revile or condemn others as it is an act of a coward. This is opposed to constructive criticism, more on the lines of malicious gossip, to be avoided completely.
14. Truth – not to tell lies. A liar can never attain respect of others. It is insult to the gift of speech. There was a time when even the courts used to accept the testimony of Bishnois as hard evidence.
15. *Vād-vivād* – Not to indulge in opprobrium and wasteful debates. Though Bishnois have been variously linked to Jainism on account of practice of

non-violence, it is in Buddhism that we find a ban on sectarian debates as they lead to wastage of time and effort, (*Drishtivād*)

16. Fasting – To observe fast and meditate on no-moon night (and the same day i.e. *Amāvasyā*) to provide rest to the body and its internal system. *Amāvasyā* is considered a very auspicious day when Bishnoi men, women, and children observe many rituals of conservation and community service. They say that this day of the month has special significance from the point of view of astronomy and planetary position. Further, the regular fading of the moon's appearance is also symbolic of the perishable nature of life. So, one should charge energy level and ponder over collective welfare.
17. *Bhajan* – To recite the holy name of Lord Vishnu
18. To be compassionate to all living being - An all-encompassing re-emphasis on caring for all life forms.
19. Not to fell green trees.
20. *Ajar* - To kill the non-perishables. To overcome the non-perishable enemies of human beings – lust, anger, envy, greed, and attachment.
21. *Thāt* – To provide a common shelter *thāt* for goat/sheep to prevent their killing. The Bishnois have maintained these shelters for animals past their use. I was very touched by visiting a shelter devoted entirely to the upkeep of blind cows. The maintenance of these shelters is through community contribution of both money and labour.
22. To consume food cooked by self or take meticulous care that food is prepared in conjunction with Bishnoi tenets. I met a few Bishnoi men who were serving in the army, where the mess also serves non-vegetarian

food. They told me that they kept their utensils separate and were negotiating that their ration of eggs be replaced with milk.

23. *Badhiyā* – Not to castrate a bull. In rural India bulls are castrated before they are used as bullocks for agricultural purpose. The underlying feeling is that the bovines are like one's children and one cannot commit such cruelty towards one's children.

24. *Amal* – Not to take opium or any of its products

25. Not to use tobacco and its products

26. Not to partake cannabis

27. Not to drink liquor. The Bishnois abhor the use of intoxicants. In India tea is offered to all the visitors but the Bishnois prefer milk over tea, even for the visitors.

28. Not to eat meat or non-vegetarian dishes.

29. Not to use blue colour clothes. In Jambho ji's times blue colour used to be obtained from a wild shrub, indigo, that adversely affected soil-fertility. This rule was laid out to support cultivation of other life-supporting crops.

### ***Shabad and Ecological Concerns***

In addition to these 29 rules, the teachings of Guru Jambeshwar are preserved in 120 statements. (Acharya, 2012; Jain, 2011:135-164) Many of these statements address sectarian strife in a subtle manner by gearing all communities, Hindu or Muslim, towards environmental concerns. In one place the listeners are urged to refrain from killing of animals else they shall suffer from cries of slain animals at their deathbed. At many places the followers are inspired to protect trees. He referred to the trees as gateways of happiness. He invoked compassion for

animals through an appeal to their religious Muslims. He states that the prophet did not kill animals and appealed for *raham* (compassion) in the hearts of the followers of *Rahman*. (*Shabad X*) He criticized the tantric practitioners for indulging in animal sacrifice. He said that Ram, the popular Hindu deity, never asked anyone to kill animals. “People will not be able to justify their violence when questioned by their deities.” (*Shabad XI*)

These rules and teachings are the foundation of the eco-religion of the Bishnois which is further demonstrated by how they implement these. Not only have they integrated these into their daily life practices but have also led them to take concrete action. These measures include positive steps to conserve flora and fauna, construct and preserve water bodies while negative measures include persistent, strong protests against poacher and hunters. Thus, a peek into their activism brings to fore Bishnoi environmentalism as a lived reality.



Unique Milestones to Bishnoi Shrines – 10 Kilometres to Mukam is announced with 10th of the 29 rules



Figure 3 Guru Jambheshvar, Sanctum Sanctorum, Lalasar



### **CHAPTER III**

## **LIVING TRADITION OF CONSERVATION AND ACTIVISM**

**“I**n the face of environmental crisis, we need all the help we can get. And, as this is perhaps the greatest crisis that the human civilization has ever faced, virtually all forms of contemporary culture, economics, politics, and spirituality, will have to make profound changes.” (Gottlieb 2011: ix)

Bishnois are a valuable resource for environmental awareness and concerns. Not only do they provide philosophical foundations for a symbiotic relationship with nature but amply manifest it through their actions. An inquiry into their practices and ecological activities from their origin to the present times can be reassuring. Tourism can also be oriented towards a new understanding of the problems of living communities. It can also add value to the responses to environmental crisis that the world is facing. This is not just about tourism but about a long tradition of ecological activities, which the community fortunately refuses to abandon.

The practice of conservation and protection of environment originated with Guru Jambeshwar. He would put into practice what he preached by paving the way for a tradition of protected groves, animal care, sustainable living. His followers, being fiercely attached to nature, from very early times took action against those who were harming nature. Bishnoi activists spare no one, be it the *Maharajas* or the reigning superstars of the Indian film industry. Therefore, the journey of the Bishnois makes for an interesting account of ecological activities.

### **Early Ecological Activities**

Life and deeds of the founder, Jambho ji, are a testimony to a commitment to ecological actions. We are already acquainted with how he saved his people from the ravages of drought and gave them a philosophy to survive and prosper against the alternatives of perishing or migration. Wherever he appeared, houses of meditation were built, some of which still exist as temples. What stands out is the fact that in the course of his numerous journeys, he created protected groves called *Oran*. Some of them like the flowering *Khejri* plantation in Rotu still exist. He planted many trees and the one still preserved in Lodipur is deeply revered by his followers even today. He is attributed with planting many *Khejri* trees at the behest of the villagers.

*Khejri (Prosopis cineraria)* occupies a significant place for desert inhabitants for its many uses. It is beneficial for both animals and humans. Its roots harbour nitrogen-producing bacteria and hence they make the soil fertile. They have become a core component of the culture of Thar region. Folk deities are honoured in folk temples, called *thān*, under these trees. Some indigenous folk sayings to predict weather and yield also refer to it. Folk wisdom associates dry trees in *Sāvan*<sup>11</sup> with good crop while in *Kārtik* vice-versa. (Jain, 2007: 82)

*Sāvan bīrgī khejrī to kātī surangā khet*

*Sāvan gehrī khejrī to kāti birangā khet*

Once on his way to Jaisalmer, near Nandeo village, in Phalaudi, near Jodhpur, Jambheshvar, seeing barren land, wanted to build a pond or *sar*. *Sar* is a local word derived from *sarovar* (Hindi for pond or lake). Its construction took four years and *Jambhāsar* emerged like an oasis by 1514 CE. It is one of the eight sacred sites of the Bishnois collectively called *ashtadhām*. *Vringāli Sarovar*, in Nokha, is another water tank that is believed to have been built by the seer himself.

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<sup>11</sup> The names of the months differ in Hindu calendar system based on lunar calculations. For details see Chatterji 1988

Not only in his life but even in his death, Jambho ji was able to bestow glory to tress. In oral tradition and vernacular literature, it is recorded that Jambho ji left for heavenly abode at Lalasar and his body was buried at Mukam. Both the places are in the Nokha tehsil of Bikaner. Both the places have temples, part of the *ashtadhām*, which also preserve sacred trees under which these momentous events occurred.

### **Historical Tradition of Activism**

More than five hundred years ago, it could hardly be visualized that a community could rise to protect trees or wild deer by risking their lives. Jambho ji's humanitarian and pragmatic philosophy earned him a large band of dedicated followers. The Bishnois soon grew in numbers and strength. Stories of their relentless dedication to the preservation of animals and trees were widely circulated. The famous *Chipko* movement in contemporary India, where women hugged the trees to resist the depredations of loggers and contractors is said to be rooted in the Bishnoi tradition.

In 1604 AD, two Bishnoi women from Ramsari village, Karma and Gora, are believed to have sacrificed their lives in an effort to prevent the felling of *Khejri*, at the behest of the local feudal lord, *Thākur*. This incident is recorded in *Sākhi*, a vernacular collection by Vilhoji, who is celebrated as the first follower of Jambho ji. The feudal master had to bow down to this exemplary sacrifice. He apologized and vowed to never fell trees from a Bishnoi village. This was the first incident that led to legendary reverence of trees by the Bishnois.

Vilho ji has narrated a similar episode around 1670 CE Tilwasani village of Jodhpur. Thakur Gopalsdas Bhati of Khejadla village sent an emissary, Kirpa to cut a *Khejri* tree. The Bishnoi leader politely requested him to refrain from cutting the tree. The agents paid no heed and lifted their axes. Seeing this

horror, Kheenwani, a woman from the Bishnoi community hugged the tree. She was cut by the cruel axe of the violent perpetrators. Her sacrifice was followed two more devotees – male and female. Hearing about this supreme sacrifice, *Thakur* himself came to the village and signed a written pact to never harm trees of this region.

In the second half of 17<sup>th</sup> century Medta feudatory Thakur Narasinghdas of Rajod got trees of *Khejri* cut before Holi from a village of Nagaur, Polas. *Holi*, is a spring festival of Hindus, though usually celebrated across communities by putting colours on each other as a mark of love and affection. It is a two-day celebration. On the first day a tree is burnt in commemoration of a mythological story. When the Bishnois came to know of this, the community passed a resolution to get the offenders punished.

Rajod Thakur refused to comply with their request. Bucha Ram took the responsibility for the protection of ecological ethics by sacrificing his life. Word spread in the neighbouring areas too and a huge crowd gathered. Such persistent opposition angered the feudal lord and Buch Ram was beheaded by his men. Later, he repented this cruel act. He admitted his folly and apologized. He also accepted all the demands of the Bishnois in the interest of the trees and animals. Vernacular couplets *Sākhi* by Kesho ji record an eyewitness account of this incident.

### **The Martyrdom of Amrita Devi and Khejarli Massacre**

The sacrifice at Khejarli of more than three hundred Bishnoi men and women, led by Amrita Devi Bishnoi is the most famous and most horrid incident. Hundreds of innocent environmentalists from the Bishnoi village of Khejarli were killed in 1730 AD as they clung to the trees that were being cut at the orders of Maharaja Abhay Singh of Jodhpur. The ruler was apparently in need of wood for the lime kiln for his new palace. So the king sent his soldiers to cut

trees in the nearby region of Khejarli, where the village is filled with the large number of trees. Basically, in the desert region vegetation is scarce and due to careful tending by the Bishnois, their villages are full of trees. But when Amrita Devi and local villagers came to know about it, they opposed the king's men. The malevolent feudal party told her that if she wanted the trees to be spared, she would have to give them money as bribe. She refused to acknowledge this demand and told them that she would consider it as an act of insult to her religious faith and would rather give away her life to save the green trees.

The Bishnois were getting inspired to give up their lives to prevent the armed men of the powerful ruler to touch their loved and revered trees. Led by the indomitable courage of Amrita Devi, many villagers joined her. They attempted to resist by hugging and encircling the trees. But the king's men were determined to follow orders quite ruthlessly. As soldiers kept on killing villagers, more and more Bishnois came forward in defense of the ethics that their teacher Jambho ji had taught them.

Two hundred and sixty nine men and ninety four women sixty-three Bishnois were killed when axes fell on the trees and they protected the trees with their unarmed bodies. Their names are recorded at the site as honoured martyrs<sup>12</sup>. Finally the conscience of the ruler awakened after such massive loss of life. Hearing the dreadful cries he himself arrived at the gory spectacle of bloodshed. The ruler Abhay Singh came to the scene of the massacre and had it halted. This is still remembered as the great Khejarli sacrifice. Some Bishnois who were killed protecting the trees were buried in Khejarli village near Jodhpur, where a simple grave with four pillars had been erected. Every year, in September, the Bishnois assemble there to commemorate the extreme sacrifice made by their people to preserve their faith and religion.

The sacrifice made by the 363 members of Bishnoi community 283 years back in Jodhpur has now been adapted into a film '*Sāko - 363*'. There is a tradition of representing this legendary event in folk paintings, posters etc. (Figure 4)

“In the martyrdom of the Bishnois can be read a narrative of resistance to Rajput or upper-caste domination, though the story is far more often adduced as an illustration of the conservational ethic and wisdom of the Bishnois” (Lal, 2003) Gottlieb comes up with another justification of these actions of Bishnois, which he clubs with *Chipko* movement of Uttaranchal when in the seventies women hugged trees to resist their cutting. Vanadna Shiva, while recounting about the *Chipko* movement postulates that the tree-hugging tradition goes back to the Bishnois. (Shiva, 2002: 73)

The moral guidelines towards environmental conservation were regarded as laws and it was believed that “a human being is authorised to use natural resources, but has no divine power of control and dominion over nature and its elements...abuse and exploitation of nature for selfish gains is unjust and sacrilegious.” (Gottlieb, 1996: 163)

Gottlieb calls these movements ‘Forest *Satyagraha*’. *Satyagraha* literally means insistence on truth. In political context, it was a peaceful way of resistance and protest introduced by Mahatma Gandhi during India’s struggle against British colonial forces. Mahatma Gandhi had also said that nature has enough for everyone’s need but not for everyone’s greed. Khejarli sacrifice is a powerful example of community values, solidarity, and valorous resistance to imperial forces but the most important element that emerges is the unconditional respect and love for nature. “The much-revered *Khejri* tree, in particular, plays a crucial role in the desert ecology: it provides food, fodder, and building materials. Thus, in the cosmology of the Bishnois, though trees are viewed as intrinsically

venerable, their (what might be termed) reasonable use-value is not overlooked” (Lal, 2003)

Lal (2003) has also suggested that “Bishnoi narratives themselves suggest that environmental awareness and activism was first pioneered by women. Though no one is prepared to suggest a continuous and unbroken history from the Bishnois to the Chipko movement, eco-feminists might reasonably argue that in India at least the earth has traditionally been viewed as the receptacle for all living beings, and that an assault upon nature is nothing less than an attack upon the dignity of woman. Wherever women have been custodians of nature, eco-feminists argue, there the principles of fecundity and the sanctity of life have been upheld” Lal opens up new directions of inquiry but it appears that Bishnoi identity was more at play than gender. The ecological activism is equally shouldered by men, women, and children of the community.

The history of Bishnois points to accumulated wisdom of survival in desert topography. Howsoever, one might interpret the Bishnoi relationship with nature is familial, divine, and striking in the forms of fierce and spirited protective instinct. Not just trees but birds and animals are given the same love, affection, and are fiercely protected. This is especially evident in the case of blackbucks that announce Bishnoi villages with their shared existence all over.

### **Blackbuck – The Ancestor Child**

“*Kālo Hiran Mhāro Bābo Se*” (The Blackbuck is my ancestor), I am told by a woman who adjusts her bright red drape, called *Odhni*, over her head every now and then. She definitely wants to put her best foot forward before this researcher and wants to look immaculate for the camera she is carrying. We are sitting in the wide, open ground outside her house in the sand sipping warm milk. I can sense her self-consciousness as every few minutes her eyes drift to her husband sitting at a small distance. Suddenly a fawn came running about excitedly and

started encircling her and tugging at her *odhni*. She lost all her shyness and lifted him to her lap and hugged and caressed it joyfully. It took her a good few minutes to remember I was there too. She smiled and said this is my child – *mhāro tābar se*.

I was both amused and touched by this spectacle that became very commonplace during my field work with the Bishnois. Mahatma Gandhi said that the greatness of a society is shown by the way it treats its animals. The confident and comfortable togetherness of humans and animals appears somewhat unusual to an outsider but is routine here. The Bishnois not only feed and water their ‘animal-children’ but also tend to them for lifetime. Bishnoi women even nurse orphaned or injured animals. Their uncontaminated protection instinct can only be attributed to maternal affiliation. According to legend, it was Jambeshwar himself who demanded that the Black Buck should be respected in his place and for that reason hunting is an absolutely unforgivable sin. As a result of such strong bond with the Black Buck (*Antelope cervicapra*), and also the doe-eyed Indian Chinkara gazelles (*Gazella gazella*), it is unsurprising that they are enraged by any attempts to harm their bundles of delight.

### **Gazelles in Desert: Exceptional Sight, Exceptional Sacrifice**

“The fact that one can still see Black Bucks at all, today in spite of massive and brutal hunting by yesterday’s princes and today’s poachers, is almost exclusively the merit of Bishnoi communities.” (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004: 44) But this has to be attributed to tremendous sacrifices made by the members of the Bishnoi community.

Many Bishnois are recorded to have lost lives to the bullets of the deer-hunters. At the young age of twenty two, Haradan Ram Godara died in this valorous manner in 1939 in a village near Jodhpur. In 1947, we get many names of



martyrs who tried to obstruct the cruel motives of the hunters. Dhunkal Ram Mal of Rotu, Nagaur, Chimna Ram and Pratapa Ram of Gudhamalani, Barmer similarly sacrificed their lives in 1947. Arjun Ram of Bhagatasani, Jodhpur became a martyr in 1950 and Birbal Ram of Lohawat, Phalaudi on 1977. In an age of consumerism and materialism, it is difficult to visualize that people give away their lives for wild deer or trees. This is not a waning phenomenon. The Bishnois tell that the younger generation is far more vigilant and dedicated. The Bishnois do this as a part of duty without seeking glorification, yet it is heartening to find a record that shows consistent adherence to the tradition. One only wishes that the need may never arise for any Bishnoi or non-Bishnoi to resort to such extreme sacrifices.

Hanuman Singh Bishnoi of Jaipur edits a Bishnoi journal *Sangoshti Vani*. In one of its issues, he has reported thirty six instances from 1979-81, when the Bishnois proactively protected the deer. (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004: 63-67) I will cite just two instances to highlight the courage of these indigenous environment activists.

25 August 1979: Poachers fired in the air as Birma Ram Baniyal chased them and identified the running persons. Some Bishnois guarded the dead body of the gazelle while others pressurized the poachers in an adjoining village to kneel down. The poachers reported the following day with an apology and took a vow not to hunt again. They were pardoned in a meeting attended by the entire folk village as the animals were given a burial.

12 November 1981: As news of a gazelle having been poached reached, nearly 60 Bishnois assembled at Sadri Tanka in Pilwa area in Jodhpur district. They could not catch any poacher. A case was registered with the Lohawat police station.

## **From Passive to Active: The Protectors of Black Buck**

As is evident from even a brief perusal of their sacrifice, Bishnois leave no stone unturned to protect their beloved animal. The martyrdom continued in the 90s and even in the present times. In fact, the Bishnois have become pro-active by taking recourse to legal measures and seeking full co-operation of the state machinery. For long, Black Buck has been declared protected species and it is a criminal offence to kill it. The Bishnois do not deter from saving the blackbuck even at the expense of their lives. We find examples of life-sacrifice as late as 1996, 2000, 2003, 2006.

The Bishnois commemorate these sacrifices by recording these names in their journals and annual gatherings or fairs at places like Khejarli. This does not allow their resolve and commitment towards their flora and fauna to weaken. It creates awareness among the young members of the community. The Government of Rajasthan has passed various laws in support of these concerns. Indian Government has also instituted an award in the name of Amrita Devi. Amrita Devi wildlife Protection award is given for significant contribution in the field of wildlife protection. This is a recognition for having shown exemplary courage or having done exemplary work for the protection of wildlife. A cash award of Rupees One lakh is presented to individuals/institutions involved in wildlife protection. The selfless commitment of the Bishnois to the wildlife in general is remarkably inspiring.

## **Salman Khan and the Sacred Black Buck Episode**

“This story of Blackbuck raises the hope that cultural associations of Indian biodiversity with local communities can be a powerful force in their conservation.” says Gaurav Moghe<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> [http://www.biodiversityofindia.org/index.php?title=Salman\\_Khan\\_and\\_the\\_sacred\\_Blackbuck\\_episode](http://www.biodiversityofindia.org/index.php?title=Salman_Khan_and_the_sacred_Blackbuck_episode) last accessed on 13/8/2016

Salman Khan, needs to introduction to Indians or anyone having little interest in Bollywood. He is a reigning superstar, immensely successful and popular in equal measure. He is the only actor to star in the highest-grossing Bollywood films of nine separate years. Khan's off-screen life is marred by controversy. One such controversy that landed him in prison and consequent legal trouble is the Black Buck episode. Though neither implicated nor exonerated for a long time, the episode has haunted him since 1998.

The black buck is a species of antelope listed as near-threatened since 2003. In India it is considered an endangered species and protected under the Wildlife Protection Act of 1972. Black Buck is found commonly in Bishnoi villages, where they roam freely, foraging for leaves. They are noticeably bold; they seem unafraid of strangers. The deer have good cause to feel safe. We have already seen that the Bishnoi community considers the antelope sacred and traditionally reveres them.

In October 1998, it is said that while shooting for a film, Salman and a few other film actors went out hunting and ended up killing two blackbucks and several Chinkaras. The tidings caused outrage among the local Bishnois. The vociferous opposition of the Bishnoi community was caught on by the national media and the issue soon became a national issue. Normally in India it is not easy to nab someone with the stature of Salman Khan, public pressure - especially from the Bishnoi community - forced Rajasthan police to arrest Salman Khan. After seven years of litigation, Salman Khan was fined Rs. 25,000 and sentenced to one year of rigorous imprisonment for breaking the strict wildlife protection laws. But more recently, on 25 July 2016, to the chagrin of the Bishnois, he has been acquitted by the High Court<sup>14</sup>. The Government of Rajasthan has moved the Supreme court in appeal against this decision in October 2016.

Some years later, a former captain of the Indian cricket team, Mansoor Ali Khan Pataudi, was also embroiled in a similar controversy. Cricket and cinema are sometimes called as ‘religions’ of Indians as they are hugely popular. But these are no obstacles for the determined environmentalism Bishnoi. In 2005, the Bishnois were in turmoil when Tiger Pataudi, as the former captain was popularly called, allegedly shot a blackbuck in Haryana, a northern state bordering Rajasthan. Pataudi was arrested, but died in 2011 before the trial concluded. "For us the hunting of a blackbuck is like the killing of our guru," a Bishnoi leader had said after Pataudi's sensational arrest<sup>15</sup>.

“The Bishnoi are devoted ecologists. Although they are friendly people, full of toothy smiles and warm hospitality, they can also be fierce when defending nature. The Bishnoi of this area have been known to chase down poachers and attack them.<sup>16</sup>” (Kapur, 2010) Although Salman Khan's petition for deference of the jail term has been pending for five long years and it appears he has not been indicted, this episode highlights the power of faith and belief in promoting wildlife conservation. “If every community in India decided to conserve the flora and fauna it considered sacred, a lot of species (and forestland) may be saved from destruction.” (Moghe)

### **Bishnois in Contemporary Discourse**

*We have lived to see a time without order  
In which everyone is confused in his mind.  
One cannot bear to join in the madness,  
But if he does not do so  
He will not share in the spoils,  
And will starve as a result.  
Yes, God; wrong is wrong:  
Happy are those who forget,  
Happier yet those who remember and have deep insight*  
(Javanese poem, from Geertz 2000:106)

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<sup>15</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/mar/24/bollywood-actors-charged-poaching> last accessed on 13/8/2016

<sup>16</sup> [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/world/asia/08iht-letter.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/10/08/world/asia/08iht-letter.html?_r=0) last accessed on 13/08/2016

The traditional beliefs of Bishnois are conducive to harmony between man and nature. They have been successful in getting political, legal and social support. It is noteworthy that the official flag of Bikaner kingdom in the seventeenth century depicts the tree of Khejri. “Flags in medieval India depicted animals—the lion in the Mughal case. Hence, the representation of the Khejri is unusual. What is striking to this day is its critical role in sustaining agriculture and animal husbandry.” (Kumar, 2005: 141)

Modern laws also support the environmental ethics of the Bishnois but the real challenge comes from the onslaughts of modernity. Use of plastic is becoming more and more rampant. The Bishnois tell people that it is bad as animals eat it. They have installed many garbage cans to ensure cleanliness and clear wayward plastic bags. Decline of agriculture and resultant migration to cities is also a great difficulty. The strength of the ecological activism of the Bishnois lay largely in collective action. A scattered populace may not be so effective. “India is getting more and more developed,” Khiyaram Bishnoi said. “People like us are less educated and have more expenses. Our children will move to cities.” He said he worried that the 29 precepts would decline. (Kapur, 2010)

Therefore, the ethics of the community should be showcased so that they are upheld by human-beings at large. The responsibility of conservation should not be only on the shoulders of the Bishnois. The environmental crisis looms much larger today to be left like this. Sustainable tourism is a way to popularise the Bishnoi worldview. It may also serve as an economic boost and check urban exodus resulting from lower yields and increasing material requirements.

There are many other aspects of Bishnois that make them an attractive tourism option in the light of many contemporary concerns. Religious syncretism and a reinterpretation of rituals is also a positive trait of Bishnoi tradition. “Some say that he [Jambho ji] was disenchanted by the struggles over political power

between Hindus and Muslims, and sought ways not only to reconcile them but also to put before them an example of a heightened moral sensibility.” (Lal, 2003) Lal (2003) further elaborates upon the context of the times of Jambho ji, “Moreover, the customs of the Bishnoi point to an attempt on the part of Jambaji to forge a more syncretic movement, characteristic of the wave of *bhakti* (devotion) sweeping India at that time: thus, though the Bishnois worshipped Vishnu, they adopted the Muslim practice of burial of the dead. Jambaji,[sic.] evidently, could not countenance the idea of felling a tree to obtain wood for the funeral pyre. His near contemporaries in north India would have been Kabir, Tulsidas, and Mirabai, among other famous exponents of *bhakti*, and one has only to recall Kabir’s disdain for customary practices (such as circumcision among Muslims, and the thread ceremony among savarna [high-caste] Hindus) to realize that Jambaji’s own iconoclasm, whatever its distinct features, was perhaps in some respects part of the wider ethos.”

The Bishnois strongly uphold harmony with nature but they also seek harmony in the society. The Bishnoi community is a close-knit community. Marriages usually take place within the community but anyone who wishes to adhere to their tenets is welcome to their fold. What is remarkable is that the caste system that has strangely continued to plague the Indian society is conspicuously absent in the social structure of the Bishnois. Although Pankaj Jain mentioned that Bishnois are referred as Muslims in Marwar Census, 1891, it does not appear to be the case. They are mentioned under minor agricultural castes. The Census Reports of 1881, 1891 etc record their syncretic practices<sup>17</sup>.

Tor J, a British lady decided to live with the Bishnois for a few months. (Figure 5) She wrote in her blogpost, “Most people will know the term ‘sustainable living’ and, in the UK, it is generally perceived as a marketers’ buzz phrase to

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<sup>17</sup> See Appendix for excerpts on Bishnois in the Marwar Census Report, 1891 and Panjab Census, 1881

make us feel that we're doing our bit to combat 'environmental issues'. Here the environment is not seen as a problem. Sustainable living is just part of a happy, healthy life, not a source of sacrifice.”<sup>18</sup>

The community displays remarkable self-reliance. That, perhaps, stems from their practice of transforming desert landscape to green belts dotted with ambling deer and flitting peacocks. Their caring attitude and warm hospitality is nothing short of a marvel. The sturdy men in white or saffron overalls and equally well-built women, adorned in bright colours complemented by unique jewellery, enhance the beauty of their hamlets. The thatched roofs with cultural patterns are so inviting that attempting a transformation of present-day matter-driven consciousness through tourism seems like a plausible idea. The Bishnoi tourism has the unique advantage of tapping into the twin reservoirs of tangible as well as intangible cultural heritage.



Figure 4 Khejarli Massacre in a Folk Painting

<sup>18</sup> <https://bishnois.wordpress.com/about/> last accessed on 13/08/2016





Figure 5 Tor J – Blogger in Bishnoi Gear



A Poster of Amrita Devi at Khejarli



## CHAPTER IV

# CULTURAL HERITAGE OF THE BISHNOIS

*Jaṭhe hoiye nahi lilo bāñṭh*

*Baṭhe par nahi meri chhāñṭ*

– *Jambeshwar*

(I do not cross the land where green trees are not present)

“Always recurring, typical motives on postcards, brochures, photos and travel descriptions are long camel caravans against the background of sharp edged dunes, riders and sun-burned faces and multi-coloured turbans under a glaring sun – in short: a typical desert scene. But Rajasthan represents so much more.” (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004:27) The life-hostile dreariness of Thar Desert in western Rajasthan is jotted with green belts here and there. This is entirely due to human effort. The wise strategies of local communities can be attributed to working out this miracle, of which, the Bishnois seem to be particularly proactive.

Drought is one of the most harrowing associations of Rajasthan in public consciousness. During drought periods in Rajasthan, the flames of one pyre next to other could regularly be seen. The carcasses of cattle died of thirst forced the farmers into ecological migration. These tragedies do not affect the Bishnoi areas in such severity. Their frugal routines continue in a peaceful manner. “Even under such difficult circumstances they not only manage to provide the necessary for themselves but are even able to uphold their care for animals and by that creating the particular little paradise that other parts of the world have not seen for a long time - or never at all.” (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004: 29)

The secret of the creation of such an exemplary and heart-warming oasis lies in the ability of the Bishnois to manage the scanty resources with extreme

efficiency. A glimpse into their unique lifestyle provides an interesting tourism option. Their management of water resources to deal with frequent shortage of rainfall is an eye-opener. An interaction with the indigenous coping mechanism forays into some interesting water harvesting structures and techniques. Their habitation is also designed to cope with vagaries of temperature in the desert land. The food and drinks serve an interesting palate of a combination of desert ingredients, when available and when not available.

Amidst such hardships, the people of Rajasthan enliven their existence by bright costumes, reverberating melodies, rhythmic dances, intricate embroidery, wall paintings, and stylish jewellery that construct the colourful culture of Rajasthan. For this reason, the region is referred to as “*Rangeelo Rajasthan*.” The Bishnois are not untouched by this regional inclination of regaling in colours and a ‘joie de vivre’ is translated exceptionally well in the treasures of both tangible and intangible cultural heritage. After a romanticised past, colour is the second most popular motif associated with marketing of Rajasthan tourism. “The term ‘colour’ and related words invite one into an exciting world. Colour signals that and a visual as well as emotional feast is to be experienced. ‘Colour’ represents the exotic: this is an out of ordinary place, where emotional responses are stronger than in everyday life.” (Henderson and Weisgrau 2016:73)

The cultural heritage of the Bishnois is not limited to their traditional worldview given to them by their teacher Jambheshwar’s and which they continue to follow even until the present times. The anthropologist Goodenough (2003) writes “Traditions are tied to activities.”<sup>19</sup> The structures of the Bishnoi villages are a manifestation of their ecological commitment. The water harvesting structures, protected groves, the huts, the bird-feeds, animal water-tanks, dried-up vegetables are all technological innovations that become crucial in coping

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<sup>19</sup> <http://www.annualreviews.org/doi/full/10.1146/annurev.anthro.32.061002.093257> last accessed on 14/08/2016

with desert ecology and contain important lessons for present-day environmental problems. The principles of sustainable livelihood have been strongly internalized by this community. They get adequately reflected in everyday customs and collective solidarity.

But the frugal existence does not render their lives mundane and tedious. The people seek a joyful existence with a beautifying presence of cultural motifs in houses, costumes and jewellery. The strong familial ties, not just with humans, songs, dances and social rituals render the Bishnoi cultural heritage with an inviting, attractive cultural kaleidoscope. Let us undertake a brief survey of some of the aspects of this enchanting cultural heritage that has dazzle and simplicity, struggle and solidarity, strife and peace, and also meaning and inspiration.

### **Ideology of Ecology in Action: Land, Water, and Beings**

The practical aspect of folk-wisdom of the Bishnois is reflected in their relationship with land, water, and birds and animals. A participative tourism trajectory can be planned to acquire a familiarity with the Bishnoi perspective on livelihood practices. A discussion on some important features shall facilitate the tourism framework to follow.

### **Land and Habitation**

“Ranaram Bishnoi is a tall handsome man in his mid-70s who takes his sobriquet of the ‘tree man’ rather seriously. No sooner we exchange greetings than he whisks us to the desert swathe where he’s planted over 27,000 trees turning it green. He has single-handedly stopped the march of the desert, which left to itself would have muzzled the farmlands adjoining it and beyond. The desert dunes now lie tamed and anchored to the roots of Ranaram’s trees. The indigenous trees he has planted are *neem*, *rohida*, *kankeri*, *khejri*, fig,

bougainvillea and *babool*.”<sup>20</sup> This not a solitary example when the Bishnois took action to conserve the land. There are vast stretches of land, protected by them, where cutting of trees is prohibited, Only the tree branches that fall on their own can be picked and used as firewood, a necessity in these rural pockets. These groves are called *oraṇ* or *ān*. (Figure 6)

At a time when the concept of ‘land’, particularly in urban understanding has been reduced to real estate (Bharucha, 2003:36), such communal ownership and maintenance of land offers a necessary counter-perspective. According to tradition whenever there was a village settlement in western Rajasthan, a part of land was allotted in the name of the folk deity. This land was called *oraṇ*. (Jain, 2005:1) Though not limited only to the Bishnois, the Bishnoi have fostered many such sheltered groves that are associated with Guru Jambheshwar. Due to the divine association, its protection is believed to accrue merit but any transgression is likely to bring serious consequences of divine wrath. Such faith coupled with zeal and dedication of the Bishnois has turned them into a miracle of desert and a very beneficial factor to environment. “*Oraṇs* serve as important rechargers of rainwater in the desert aquifers, where every single drop of water is precious. It is estimated that *oraṇs* account for about nine percent of the desert area.” (Mukhopadhyaya, 2008:161) Peepasar, the birth place of Jambho ji , alone has four *oraṇs* – *Jambho ji ki oraṇ*, *Peepaji ki oraṇ*, *Hanuman ji ki oraṇ*, and *Maharaj ki oraṇ*.

The sacred groves also constitute the life-line of the poor whose cattle can graze freely here. Some of the trees are hundreds of years old and must be ecological treasures. One can visit these groves for their cool shade and the company of trusting peacocks and ambling gazelles mostly adjacent to the sacred shrines. In fact, one also witnesses indigenous water reservoirs and

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<sup>20</sup> Austa, Sanjay 2015 *Ranaram Bishnoi, the 75-year-old who stopped the march of the desert*, 25 April 2015, <https://yourstory.com/2015/04/ranaram-bishnoi/> last accessed on 14/08/2016

platforms to scatter bird-feed. All this makes for a wholesome experience indeed. The trees and vegetation also provide building material for construction of houses. The thatched huts are built almost entirely from indigenous resources – mud, grass, dried tree branches, cow dung etc. They remain exceptionally cool against the blazing desert sun. There is a strong emphasis on cleanliness in accordance with the religious principles. The simple habitations are adorned with local motifs hand-painted on the walls beautifully. Though, one can see many houses now built with modern construction materials like cement, bricks and plaster but the charm of the traditional living underlies ecological sensibility. Its continuity does appear to be threatened by inroads of modernity.

### **Water and its Management**

The region of western Rajasthan in India faces frequent droughts and acute shortage of water. This has compelled the inhabitants to incorporate mechanisms to conserve water in their everyday living. These traditional methods have been developed over centuries and reflect the accumulated wisdom of many generations, of which community participation has been a crucial component. This tradition is basically indicative of human adaptation to local environment. It was clearly understood by the people very early that rain water needed to be preserved for dry spells. (Misra and Chaturvedi, 2014:94) The Bishnoi areas present an interesting gamut of various traditional structures that have been constructed using the indigenous knowledge and locally available material to cope with drought.

*Nāḍīs* are small man-made ponds with embankments, wherein rainwater from the adjoining catchment area called *āgor* is stored. The *ṭāṅkā* is yet another structural mechanism for indigenous water conservation that utilises rainwater stored on rooftops. The size of *ṭāṅkā* is determined in accordance with the number of members in the respective household and their requirement of water.

A large sized well is called *Berā*. In case a large quantity of water is required, water from the *pakhālī* is collected in a larger reservoir called *koṭhā*. Water from the *pakhālī* or *koṭhā* is poured into *khelīs*, rectangular stone containers, on either side of the *berā*. The remaining water is made available for the consumption of animals. There are a large number of *kuāñ* or wells, new and old, in the drought-affected regions. (Figure 7-8)

Water harvesting is not limited to structural devices but extends into the daily lives of the inhabitants. The local residents use various indigenous techniques to store food grains and fodder so as to enable their use in periods of drought. *Kalāra* is an indigenous technique used by farmers to store fodder for their cattle for use during the drought season. (Figure 9) Fodder thus stored can be used up to a period of ten years. This structure also uses locally available grass for its construction. In view of the scarcity of water, it is not surprising that the villagers in these regions use very few utensils for cooking in order to save water required to clean the utensils after use. (Misra and Chaturvedi, 2014:94-110)

## **Flora and Fauna**

The religious tenets of the Bishnois were tailored to conserve bio-diversity of the area. It has to be credited that the community has strived to create eco-friendly social harmony vis-à-vis plants and animals. The diverse flora and fauna contribute towards the sustenance of the eco-system. Indigenous knowledge and practices of Bishnois provide clues for conservation and sustainable development. (Maiti and Maiti 2011:i) The desert vegetation has been preserved due to special efforts of plantation and mission against deforestation by the Bishnois. Their special reverence for the desert tree *Khejri* is incorporates myth and pragmatism. The oldest tree, “*Doodha ji ka Khejra*’ at *Jambho ji ki Oraṇ*, Peepasar is said to be over five hundred years old.

“Peepasar has about 30,000-5,000 trees....Khejri is the most prominent tree species representing sixty one percent of total vegetation here. Bordi (*Zyzphus mauritiana*) is next with about thirteen percent, followed by Rohida (*Tecomella undulate*) which makes up seven and a half percent and Ankara about five percent with Kumta (*Acacia Senegal*) being about Four and a half percent.” (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004:59)

It does seem that women have developed the strongest bonds with animals. An old folk song urges the crane as a sister to take a message to the woman’s husband who is in a far away land. It is noteworthy that Siberian cranes have been migrating in this area for quite some time. We have already recorded the familial care and fierce protection that the Black Bucks and the Gazelles are provided. There is arrangements for water and feed for animals and birds. They can move about freely without fear of harm. It is a sight to see large number of peacocks that roam about freely in Bishnoi households. Around the sacred groves many other birds can be sighted.

Many temples have enclosures for deer and provision to take care of their injuries, very often a result of their skirmishes with wild dogs. Hamza Khan reports that every few hours or so, somebody turns up with an injured deer at the temple. “Laxman Bisnoi, 20, didn’t think twice about getting his clothes, especially his white shirt, dirty when he saw dogs chasing the deer, now in his arms. “The soil is soft because of the rains, and, hence, they can’t run as fast,” he says. He called up the forest department officials but the calls went unanswered. So, his friend Demaram, 25 and he loaded the deer on their bike and brought it to the temple.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hamza Khan 2016 ‘Till the Last deer is Saved’ in *Indian Express* 14/08/2016  
<http://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-news-india/till-the-last-deer-is-saved-2974563/> last accessed 14/08/2016

In this region a cow who would lose way is sure to find a hospitable and welcoming household. The non-yielding cows, old and sick and the calves are kept in shelters with tender care. There are many *gaushalas*, as the cow shelters are called, and the upkeep is through community contribution. During the course of a visit to the *Gaushala*, I was quite impressed to see it being divided into three sections. The management of healthy cows produced milk which was collected and distributed freely for community feasts and upkeep of shrines etc. There was another section of cows, which were weak or sick. They were being provided special care. Their feed was being mixed with extra nutritive ingredients. The section that moved me most was of cows that had turned blind and old. They were given a dignified existence. Of course, there was an additional section too that had deer playing about. After all this was a ‘Bishnoi’ *Gaushala*!

### **Decoding Intangible Heritage: Customs, Costumes and Cuisine**

“The term ‘cultural heritage’ has changed content considerably in recent decades, partially owing to the instruments developed by UNESCO. Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants... While fragile, intangible cultural heritage is an important factor in maintaining cultural diversity in the face of growing globalization. An understanding of the intangible cultural heritage of different communities helps with intercultural dialogue, and encourages mutual respect for other ways of life.<sup>22</sup>” The cultural expressions of Bishnois include their unique customs, their costumes and jewellery, art and craft, and culinary delights culled in their vegetarian universe of limited vegetation but unlimited imagination.

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<sup>22</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> last accessed on 14/08/2016



## Customs and Rituals

The Bishnois have some noteworthy customs. When a marriage takes place, the newly-wed couple is expected to plant a tree and tend to it lifelong. Unlike the Hindu custom of cremation, the Bishnois bury the dead like the Muslims. The explanation given is economizing on the requirement of wood that leads to cutting of trees. Their life is simple devoid of elaborate rituals.

They light earthen lamps with *ghee* and frequently perform *havan*, burning a lot of ghee in the fire. It is believed that this purifies the environment. Even their temples have a serene ambience with no images or idols in accordance with the instructions of the great seer. One finds only a solitary lamp burning.

The Bishnois offer food and abundant milk products to just about any visitor. One can lay to rest all apprehensions to rest about food supplies in these areas. They are very kind and exceptionally welcoming to all visitors. It can actually get very difficult to wriggle out of their effusive hospitality. There was only one excuse that worked for me if I was feeling too full. I would tell my hosts that I was just coming from another Bishnoi household who fed me a lot already. Only premise that they accepted as they do seem to know their tribe! It was a very touching gesture, an inherent trait of all Bishnoi men, women, and even children.

Once I commented on the better taste of *Bajra* (millet) in these areas, while savouring a traditional lunch in a Bishnoi household. As I was leaving, Gopal Bishnoi, the house owner handed me a *potli*, a makeshift bag. It was around five kilograms of *Bajra* tied in a cloth, knotted carefully. I could not refuse and left without exchanging a word but with grateful eyes and an appreciative heart.

I also got a chance to witness the festivities of a marriage. The songs and dances and the simple rituals engaged the community in rejoicing. They take out processions with women singing traditional songs, in their traditional attire and

fineries accompanied by the beats of a *dholak*. It is completely enthralling to see almost entire village being a part of the delightful celebration.

### **Clothing and Ornaments**

“Rajasthan is colorful because of what its people wear. The dull-colored monotone of the sands and hills look cheery with the vibrant spirits of the people who wear bright colors to make up for the absence of blossoming flowers. Interesting costumes and jewellery of these desert people are not mere ornaments for them. Everything from head-to-toe including the turbans, clothes, jewellery and even the footwear establishes your identity, your religion and your economic and social status in Rajasthan.<sup>23</sup>” The Rajasthan Tourism Department describes the vibrancy of dress and adornments of the people of Rajasthan as an epitome of vibrancy of its culture.

Following the tradition of Rajasthan the men and women of the Bishnoi community use distinguishing clothing and jewellery. It is said that one can recognize them from afar because of the attire. I also noticed that the Bishnois are easily identifiable on account of their physical built. The Bishnoi are especially distinct because they, to a casual visitor, appear relatively well-built. This has not much to do with how they clad but the clue to this rather lies in what they eat. But let us discuss the details of the culinary delights of the Bishnois a little later. Taste of the food stays with you much longer but the first flavor of the Bishnoi cheer is transferred through their adornments.

The Bishnoi men convey the stark simplicity and pristine lifestyle through their attire. They are dressed very simply, normally just wearing white *dhoti* or *payjama*, *kurta* and a colourful turban, or *pagari*. A Bishnoi respondent lets me in the secret for this strong bias in favour of the white garments. I surmised that this is due to the heat and the outdoor excursions that the men have to take

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<sup>23</sup> <http://www.rajasthan-tourism.org/costumes/rajasthan-costumes.html> last accessed on 15/08/2016

throughout the day. White must be a soothing and practical choice. But the Bishnoi metaphor for this selection lies in their strict adherence to the community tenets. Madaram Bishnoi says that the white is the symbol of the Bishnoi society and a slight aberration can spoil the community's ethical fabric. It was a delightful interpretation.

The enchanting expression bursts forth in the spectacle of colour and the bling of metallic hues in the costumes and ornaments of women. Women wear a skirt or *lehanga*, tunic or *kurti-kanchali*, and a long head-scarf or *odhni*. Embroidery is also a popular way with Bishnoi women to embellish the textiles. *Kasooti* embroidery by Bishnoi women is very well-known in the region. The motifs are wide-ranging but include flora and fauna, peacock being the most popular. A printed design used solely for Bishnoi women's skirts that makes them distinct. Their attire is complemented by unique types of jewellery. A marital pendant worn on the forehead called *borla*, a big half moon shaped nose ring and a large rectangular gold plate on the chest are worn by all married Bishnoi women. Jewellery is in both silver and gold. While the head-pendant, necklaces and nose pins are in gold, jewellery worn in feet, toe-rings or *bichchiya*, or anklets or *Payal* are invariably in silver.

Although the Bishnois by the dint of their faith are not too attached to material possessions, the marital gold jewellery is cherished. Tor J (2010) explains "Bishnois try not to be fond of material possessions. However, a woman's gold jewellery is an exception because it is given as a gift at marriage, when she goes to join the house of her father-in-law. Money is not endowed because it is easily frittered and wasted, whereas gold is a long-lasting investment<sup>24</sup>." Many women, both old and young, wear a pendant with a photograph of a divine deity, mostly Jambheswar but also the Hindu god Hanuman around their neck.

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<sup>24</sup> <https://bishnois.wordpress.com/2010/12/11/bishnois-design-for-life/> last accessed on 15/08/2016

The Bishnois also have metaphysical interpretations for the choice of colours for their outfits. "Women are the symbol of creation. Which is why asked them to wear vibrant colors such as red and orange. Men wear white because it is symbolic of cleanliness and austerity."<sup>25</sup> The hand-woven, organically-dyed fabrics and rugs and terracotta objects add value to Bishnoi handicrafts. The traditional footwear *jooti* are also beautiful and practical. Not exclusive to the Bishnois but worn throughout the state, they cover the feet and can be taken off easily, a custom all Bishnoi household follow. The shoes have to be left outside.

### **Food and Drinks**

Gastronomy is the study of relationship between food and culture, art of preparing and serving rich or delicate and appetizing food, a style of cooking of particular region, and the science of good eating. In consonance with their way of life the Bishnoi cuisine is largely simple and strictly vegetarian. If you ask them what the Bishnois eat, the ready answer like any other community of Rajasthan is, "*Bajre ki roti aur kadhi*" and they will be more than willing to serve you the fare. And then you realize that the food is supplemented with desert delicacies of dried-up vegetables, *Sangri*, *Kair*, *Kachri*, all this has to be washed down with an abundant supply of buttermilk seasoned with salt and cumin seeds.

This is perfect fare to combat the desert heat. It is also a miraculous concoction in the wake of non-availability of fresh, green vegetables. The dried-up vegetables are mostly derived from desert trees and are packed with nutrition. (Chaturvedi and Nagar, 2001) *Halwa*, sweetened wheat flour with generous dollops of *ghee*, with glassful of warm milk is served too often in Bishnoi households. Almost all houses rear cows to keep milk supply in plenty. Millet or *Bajra* is the staple crop of these areas and many dishes like *Khichda*

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<sup>25</sup> <http://www.rajasthanunlimited.com/folk/bishnoi.html> last accessed on 15/08/2016

(Porridge-like) and *Rabri* (a mixture of buttermilk and bajra flour) become even more lip-smacking with a *tadka* of garlic and raw onions. *Bajra roti* is ground and mixed with *ghee* and *gur* to make the much relished dessert *choorma*. Only the first course of the meal is invariably the sweet dish. There have been some efforts to record Bishnoi cuisine as part of the television shows on food and travel. Some of them have televised exotic Bishnoi recipes<sup>26</sup>.

Tor J (2010) in her blog post *Bishnoi's Design for Life* brings out the aspects of hygiene and fasting in their food habits. "Cleanliness also features highly in the 29 principles, with rules about taking an early morning bath, washing before eating, drinking clean filtered water and a monthly religious day called *amavasya*, devoted to internal and external cleansing. It takes place each moonless night and is typified by a day of rest from all work. One main aspect of the day is a type of fast whereby no heavy food is consumed, only raw fruit and veg. (sic.) Elsewhere this is recognisable as a vogue detox recommended by elite dieticians and nutritionists, here it has been part of the religious code for hundreds of years. Scientific by design, it is understood that the moon controls our digestive system, like it controls the tides, so fasting on this day helps to cleanse the body. Rest also ensures that every individual has time for reflection, spiritual contemplation and internal cleansing at least once a month."

The Bishnois do not consume liquor and are very abhorrent towards consumption of meat. "If a Bishnoi is caught eating meat or causing pain to an animal, he is finished socially, In the small Bishnoi villages it is impossible to escape the general attention and so aberrations become general knowledge fast This fact strengthens the homogeneity of the group as far as questions of ecological ethics are concerned. (Brockmann and Pichler, 2004:25)

### ***Ashtadhām* - Scared Spaces and Tourism Circuit**

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<sup>26</sup> <http://food.ndtv.com/video-aditya-discovers-bishnoi-cuisine-213188> last accessed on 15/08/2016

There are a number of sacred sites of the Bishnois called *Sathri* or *Dhām*. All these sites usually have some connection with Guru Jambheshwar. The Bishnoi poet Govind Ram has called all those places *Sathri* that were ‘purified by the feet of Jambho ji’. Later on, some significant places came to be called *Dhām*. “Open-air shrines located in fields or under trees are called *Thān*. During those periods of time when the *thān* is associated with some kind of miracle or supernatural event, the shrine is called *dhām*.” (Bharucha, 2003: 121) The famous eight shrines of the Bishnois in Rajasthan are collectively called *Astadhām*.

1. **Peepasar** – *Peepasar dhām* is the birth place of Shri Guru Jambheshwar Bhagwan, where Jambho Ji is said to have ‘incarnated’ on the day of Janmashtami in 1451 AD (Bhadrapad vadi 8, 1508) in his mother Hansa's lap. It is also called ‘*avatār sthal*’ - the site of reincarnation. Peepasar situated in Nagaur district of Rajasthan. The place said to be Jambho ji's birthplace has the residence of Thakur Lohat ji and an old *Khejri* tree. There is a *Sathri* outside the village where Bishnoi saonts reside. *Havan*, the fire ritual, takes place regularly in the morning and evening at both these places. On *Janmashtami*, also the birthdate of Hindu deity Krishna, is celebrated at Peepasar. To reach this place by road one has to take the National Highway 89 via Mukam and Samrathal in Nokha tehsil of Bikaner district.
2. **Muktidham Mukam** – Also known as the ‘Tajmahal of Rajasthan’, *Muktidham Mukam* is the most important religious place of the Bishnoi Community. It is situated seventeen kilometers, North-east of Nokha, Bikaner district in Rajasthan on Sujangarh road. It was earlier known as *Talwa*. Jambho ji's last rites were performed here so it became his *Nirvan sthal* or *Mukam*, final destination of *mukti*, which is liberation. Bishnois believe that Guruji is resting here always. Shri Guruji's holy body was buried here in 1536CE and a trident was found on the time of

excavation, now placed on top of Mandir. A marbled beautiful temple is built here which is surrounded by sand dunes and Khejari trees. We can see fearlessly roaming of cows, deer and peacocks. An old *Khejri* tree under which Jambho ji's body was rested still exists and circumambulations are performed around it. One cannot enter these temples without covering the head as a mark of respect. There are beautiful Bishnoi sayings, of non-sectarian nature, enabling harmony of man and nature, at many places in the temple premises. What is also remarkable is that the journey from Nokha to Mekam is interspersed by very creative milestones. Each milestone has one of the Bishnoi tenets engraved upon it. By the time, one has read all the twenty nine codes; one finds the entrance to the most famous Bishnoi sacred shrine. There is an impressive arrangement to accommodate thousands of followers and feed them. This place is well-equipped from tourism point of view but requires sensibility in the light of Bishnoi belief system. (Figure 10)

3. **3. Samrathal Dhora** - *Samrathal Dhora dhām* is situated less than three kilometres south of Muktidham Mukam. Shri Guru Jambheshwar Bhagwan is said to have given most of his sermons at the Samrathal Dhora. The origin of the Bishnoi sect is attributed to have taken place at Samrathal Dhora in 1485 CE. Understandably, the Bishnoi community venerates and acknowledges its religious significance. In a *Sabad* by Guru Jambheshwar it is stated "*Guru āsan samrāthale*". It means Guruji shall always remain at Samrathal. At Samrathal Dhora Guruji came as a herdsman from Pipasar. There is a temple at the Samrathal Dhora and one religious pond down below the Dhora. Bishnoi pilgrimages carry the holy sand out of the pond by climbing the Dhora about 200 metres high. There is also a thriving grove around this sacred water body, adjacent to the shrine. Just opposite this shrine is a *That* or animal shelter that tends to

cows, healthy, sick, old – all have a place to call home. This shrine is situated in Nokha, Bikaner, easily accessible by rail or road. (Figure 11)

4. **Lohawat** – This place is situated in south of Phalaudi, Jodhpur. It is said that the Jodhpur prince Maldev had a *darshan*, divine sighting of Jambho ji at this place. There is a temple here too. (Figure 12)
5. **Janglu** - *Janglu* is a village in Nokha, Bikaner. Its twelfth century name was *Jangalakupa*. A Jain inscription calls it *Jangalakupa-durga*. This place was also known as *Ajayapura* as we learn from another Jain inscription. The Jain community is also committed to non-violence and a co-existence with the Bishnois does not seem to be a bad idea. The Bishnoi temple in this village is of special significance as it has preserved some of their founder's objects of personal use. There is also a fire altar in the village where Jambho ji himself is said to have performed a *Havan*. In the vicinity is a *Kankehri* tree, said to have been planted by the great seer himself. There is a water reservoir built by a devotee, Barsingh Baniyal, who was contemporary of Jambho ji. This pond is called '*Baringali Nadi*'. Thus, this rather obscure village has many cultural attractions which have not yet been tempered much by modern interference.
6. **Rotu** - *Rotu* village situated in Jayal tehsil of Nagaur district. Rotu is forty five kilometer north of Nagaur. This *dhām* is famous because Guru Jambheshwar is believed to have visited the village around 1514 CE for the purpose of Uma's *Mayara* or *Bhat*, a marriage ritual. Uma was the daughter of his devotee Jokhu Ram Bhadu. Jambho ji is fabled to have planted thousands of *Khejari* trees at the request of the villagers. Even now this place boasts of thick *Khejari* vegetation. These *Khejari* plantations have acquired religious significance for the Bishnois and perhaps this belief has contributed to their conservation. Today, a huge shrine, dedicated to their teacher, stands beautifully. A pious plaque of



Jambho ji, called *khanda* that belonged to his devotee and contemporary Dudoji is preserved in this temple. The temple and the plantations have enhanced the beauty of this place.

7. **Jambholav** - *Jambha dhām* or *Jambholav* is situated near Phalodi in Jodhpur district. Guru Jambho ji not only gave sermons to the people on environmental protection but also manifested their practical application. He got a holy pond dug, which came to be popularly known as - *Jambha Talaw* or *Jambh Sarvovar*. In common parlance it soon became *Jambholav*. It is a religious place, almost a pilgrimage site, for Bishnoi community. A fair is held annually on the *Chaitra Amavasya* following the Indian lunar calendar. A holy fire of *yagna* burns continuously for two days during the fair. Bishnoi women in colourful traditional Rajasthani outfits and Bishnoi men in white overalls complete with a turban pay their tribute after taking bath in the holy pond. The holy fire is said to have divinity. The devotees contribute for birdfeed. The water of this pond is considered as pure as the water of river Ganga in the rest of India.
8. **Lalasar** - *Lalasar* is situated South-east of Bikaner. This is the place where Guru Jambho ji left for his heavenly abode. His body was later taken to Mukam. A grand temple is constructed here very recently through huge community funding. An old *Kankeri* tree is present in an enclosure in the temple premises venerated by the Bishnois. An older smaller shrine also co-exists. There is a small pond outside. As the evening falls, a large number of peacocks suddenly appeared. The priest explained that these birds know that even in the darkness, they fear no harm in this campus. It remains the way of worship for Bishnois to tend for trees, birds, and animals. (Figure 13)
9. **Lodipur** – Lodipur, though not in Rajasthan, is also a holy place for the Bishnois. It is situated in Muradabad district in UP, India. Guru Jambho ji

is said to have planted a *Khejari* tree that stands in the middle of the temple here. The sighting of this tree is considered auspicious and an annual fair is held here also on *Chaitra Amavasya* of the Indian lunar calendar.

There are many other holy places and shrines of the Bishnois scattered all over the region of *Marwar*, with a concentration in the Bikaner district. These are places that clearly manifest the Bishnoi ecology in multiple perspectives. The simple shrines with no idols, arrangement of feeding bird in temples and near water bodies, protected ponds, sheltered groves, animal shelter and Bishnoi hospitality and community fervor in fairs and festivals. Even a partial circuit can give a wholesome experience of Bishnoi cultural tourism. Another way can be to steer clear of these monumental markers of Bishnoi religion and taste the livelihood practices through family stay. Further, there may be some who would want to combine the two modes to not miss out on any flavor. This survey on the rich cultural heritage of the Bishnoi community opens up multiple vistas of tourism possibilities.



Figure 6 Oran – Shelterd Grove, Samrathal dhora



Figure 1 A Traditional Well – *Beri*



**Figure 2 Water Reservoir – Nadi**



**Figure 3 Fodder Storage Structure – Kalara**



Bishnoi women – all set to attend a wedding



Figure 10 Mukam Temple





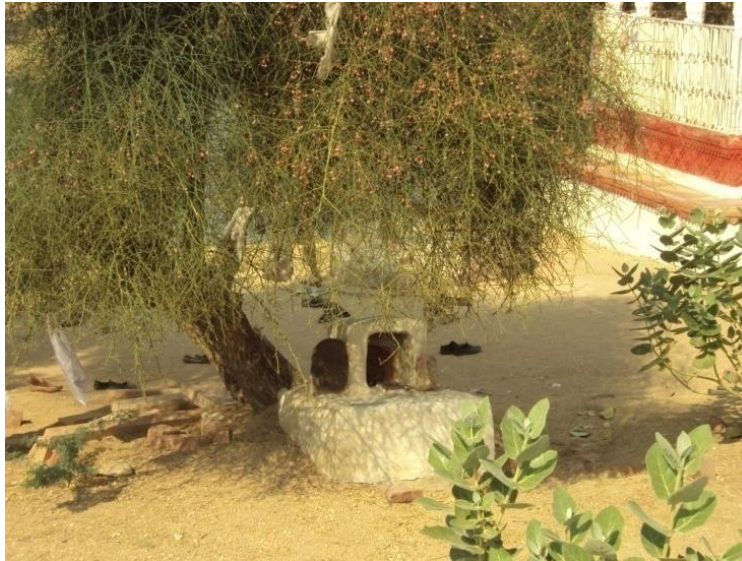
Figure 11 Temple at Samrathal Dhora



Figure 12 Lohawat – where Guru Jambheshwar spent his early years



Figure 4The Grand Temple, Lalasar



*Than* Folk shrines under trees



A Modern Bishnoi Temple



Older Temple, Lalasar

## **CHAPTER V**

# **BISHNOI TOURISM: MARKET STRATEGY AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY**

*“There is a third dimension to traveling, the longing for what is beyond”*

*Jan Myrdal*

The first point of an entry into Bishnoi tourism was in part triggered by a realization of too much emphasis on the royal metaphor in the tourism circuit. It meant a neglect of some enthralling aspects of the cultural heritage of Rajasthan. The other consideration was that the Bishnoi community has an amazing relationship with nature. That is one aspect that can be brought into the tourism circuit to highlight an alternative worldview in its practical working. Ecological dimensions of a pro-active community like the Bishnois hold special relevance when the environmental crisis and climate change are imminent dangers. And the final concern was about the community's interaction with modernity and to enable its sustenance.

### **Concerns: For Market, For Community**

Tourism potential of the Bishnois is entirely dependent on market viability. Tourism, by and large, is a commercial enterprise. So, both tourists and tour operators shall explore this type of tourism only if it serves their needs and expectations. A foray into the tourism market should have some advantages for the community also. The rapid inroads of modernity might make a dent into the ecological practices of the Bishnois. A much more looming challenge is the migration of youth to urban areas in search of better economic opportunities. Both these possibilities pose a serious threat to sustaining Bishnoi values. They are based on regional parameters and have relied heavily on community



participation. Tourism can help overcome these challenges. On one hand it can create a feeling of pride, a distinct identity among the Bishnois and on the other it can generate business opportunities. This looks like an ideal set-up to urge the Bishnois to take up tourism but is not as simple as it looks.

Tourism is a challenging socio-cultural phenomenon that is known to have had crucial and far-reaching impacts on many facets of society. “As with many other aspects of modern life, the development and expansion of tourism industry has brought both ‘blessings’ and ‘curses’ to the socio-economic and socio-cultural spheres.” (Apostolopoulos, 1996:2) One of the most critical issues associated with Bishnoi tourism is safeguarding the interests of the community.

Though, eco-cultural tourists have been showing a great interest in visiting Bishnoi settlements. Their skilful management of resource resulting in a haven for birds and animals are proving to be major attractions. But this tourist gaze has to be managed with a delicate balance. At one point, the tourist desires an authentic experience and wants to explore uncharted territories. In all probability, tourism shall make inroads in hitherto untouched areas of the Bishnois – both physically and culturally. As the model gains popularity, huge influx, which actually is a desired goal of any business, might upset the carefully guarded ecological lifestyle of the Bishnois. This leads us to another important issue of the involvement of the community itself in the enterprise of tourism.

In many cases of community-based tourism, the control is in the hands of external agencies. The know-how, mechanism, and networks of the tour operators can limit the freedom and bargaining power of the local community. Further, it should not benefit a particular stratum of the Bishnoi society. The economic viability of Bishnoi tourism can be a tool to promote social equality. One major objective of this effort to engage the Bishnois for cultural tourism is

to explore the potential of tourist trade towards an equitable distribution of its benefits. Although, the industry is geared to serve the interests of the tourist to entice him, the interest of the destination, in this case the community and an equitable distribution of benefits are also desirable goals.

Picking up from here we shall attempt a more general overview. After briefly decoding tourist attractions from the culture of Bishnois, we shall move to the various tourism models devised to meet the different tourism needs and cap it all up with working out their strengths and challenges. We are hopeful that this shall lead us to a more meaningful engagement of the community in its bid to become a tourism attraction. The objective here is to strike a balance between market interests and community interests, in other words, market realities and environmental idealism with social justice.

### **Bishnoi Tourism – Points of Attraction**

“A tourist attraction is a place of interest where tourists visit, typically for its inherent or exhibited natural or cultural value, historical significance, natural or built beauty, offering leisure, adventure, and amusement.<sup>27</sup>” It should meet the needs of the tourist that keep on changing with the times. Earlier, mega cities were top tourist destinations and later the major centre of attraction was beauty of natural landscape. A third dimension came into play with a focus on cultural encounters which appear to be the main focus of Bishnoi tourism. With that larger context in mind, we can work out the points of interests for the tourist. Although, Bishnoi tourism is not limited to a cultural experience in an abstract way, there is a physical context, built heritage and natural beauty as well. Therefore, a brief listing of tourist attraction is essential to understand the inherent considerations of the various modes of tourism, offered and proposed.

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<sup>27</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourist\\_attraction](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tourist_attraction) last accessed on 17/07/2016

Travelling and tourism have been changing over the course of time. Tourist of the twenty first century is more selective, more demanding better informed, and with better exposure. She is already a virtual tourist armed with cyber explorations of the destination. Therefore, her quest for a new experience makes Bishnoi cultural tourism a good option. With this general overview of the kind of tourism we have in mind, let us now identify major Bishnoi attractions, most of which have already been discussed in detail in previous chapters.

### **1. Landscape - Select Bishnoi Village Sites**

Braving the deserts of the Marwar region in blazing summers of 2014, I was struck by the sudden appearance of a water reservoir surrounded by a green belt. This was a pond maintained by the Bishnois of the village. The sheer contrast of the landscape with its shady trees and calm waters seem to have a transformative effect. Feeling refreshed in the cool ambience, both literally and metaphorically I received my enlightenment about the Bishnois. I had a fair inkling of their ecological religion but to see them translated into action was an unforgettable experience. I posted a picture of the place, remote, with no tourism exposure on my social network<sup>28</sup>. It elicited a great response with utter surprise from natives of Rajasthan about the existence of such water-filled, tree-laden landscape even before the arrival of monsoon. There were numerous queries about available hospitality if one plans to visit. Therefore, such select Bishnoi sites can be located for tourism purpose. (Figures 14 15, 16)

One such popular site is Guda Bishnoi Village, located about twenty two kilometres from Jodhpur. It is presented as a picturesque settlement of the Bishnoi tribal community, where rows of neat huts welcome to this traditional village. From Guda Bishnoi village, one can get an experience of the art, charm, traditions and customs of tribal life. “Bishnoi Village is a perfect picnic spot for

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<sup>28</sup><https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=874948609188979&set=a.348964805120698.105427.100000215432424&type=3&theater> posted on 14/04/2014

those who are interested in exotic wild life and nature. The main attractions of this village are Khejri trees and deer. Guda lake, a small artificial lake located few kilometres from the Bishnoi village is occupied with numerous birds and animals like domicile cranes, blackbucks, gazelles etc. Near the lake one can also find deer herds and peacocks roaming about freely without any fear of attack<sup>29</sup>.”

### **Culture - Bishnoi Lifestyle and Family Stay**

The Bishnoi sites are not devoid of a reflection of their ethics but a family stay shall serve better the needs of a tourist more intensely engaged with Bishnoi eco-lifestyle. They seek a journey that enables genuine experiences through participatory interaction. Some bloggers have pasted about these experiences who appear very pleased with the home stay. This gives them an insight into the everyday living of the Bishnois in their natural setting and ensures authenticity.

### **2. Expressions - Intangible Heritage**

UNESCO while explicating on intangible cultural heritage states, “Cultural heritage does not end at monuments and collections of objects. It also includes traditions or living expressions inherited from our ancestors and passed on to our descendants, such as oral traditions, performing arts, social practices, rituals, festive events, knowledge and practices concerning nature and universe or the knowledge and skills to produce traditional crafts.”<sup>30</sup> The Bishnois offer a rich palette of intangible heritage. The woven objects like rugs, printed cotton textiles, traditional attire, and intricate jewellery are creative expressions of the community. Food, handicrafts, fairs, festivals – all combine to form artistic expressions and are also a manifestation of their harsh surroundings and careful

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<sup>29</sup>

[http://www.webindia123.com/city/rajasthan/jodhpur/destinations/tourist\\_attractions/gudabishnoivillage.htm](http://www.webindia123.com/city/rajasthan/jodhpur/destinations/tourist_attractions/gudabishnoivillage.htm) last accessed on 17/08/2016

<sup>30</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/en/what-is-intangible-heritage-00003> last accessed on 17/08/2016

management of resources. They are souvenirs and skills that a tourist can take back as concrete and not-so-concrete evidences of a unique cultural experience.

### **3. Constructions - Tangible Heritage**

Tangible heritage is being used here with reference to the meaning of intangible heritage and therefore includes the built structures as symbols of Bishnoi culture. There are many Bishnoi temples which are beautifully constructed and have ponds, trees, deer and peacocks in the premises in characteristic Bishnoi manner. Temple at Mukam, built in pure white marble, is a reflection of serene stolidity of the Bishnois. The *Ashtadham* and nearby areas can be major tourist attractions. These places are already popular religious destination for the tourists. There is a huge influx of Bishnois from all over on auspicious occasions. As a result these sites especially, Mukam are well-equipped to provide food and lodging. As this is a sacred site of the Bishnois, some cultural sensibility is expected from the non-Bishnoi tourist as well.

Thus there are a few options available to both tourists and the community or the host and the guest, to manage local resources and attractions. The cultural tourism of the Bishnois is composed of two main elements – motivation and manifestation. The ideological motivation underlying the Bishnois results in manifold expressions and the tourist can decide his level of engagement. The tourist itineraries can be devised keeping in mind the multiple needs instead of sticking to a monolithic model. Though, tourism is by now a niche market requiring professional know-how, an involvement of the community itself is more representative and fair to all stakeholders. How much does the existing tourism scenario address community concerns? What are the options available to the tourists? These questions need to be probed into to arrive at better tourist experiences and more equitable solutions.

### **Tourism on Offer – Presentation, Participation and Representation**

As has already been mentioned, Bishnoi tourism has been picking up, though in a largely unstructured way. We had discussed in the beginning that the seeds of this study were sown by the entire emphasis on metaphors of royal past in Rajasthan tourism circuit. Bishnoi tourism was initially envisaged to offer an alternative tourism though it is difficult to create a tourism trajectory independent of the regal connection of Rajasthan. Even though the most famous Bishnoi episode of the environmental activism was when the women and men of the community took cudgels against the emperor. The site of Rajasthan tourism operated by the Government of Rajasthan states, “No trip to Jodhpur is complete without a visit to the Bishnoi Village Safari. The best (and only) way to get a glimpse into the rich cultural life of the state of Marwa, this safari is the brainchild of Rajas and Maharajas of Jodhpur<sup>31</sup>.” This only highlights the fact that tourism is a market and marketability matters and can result in misrepresentation.

It appears that while studying or devising tourism models we also have to understand another term that is ‘responsible tourism’. Responsible tourism complies with the principles of social and economic justice and exerts full respect towards the environment and its cultures. It recognises the centrality of the local host community and its right to act as a protagonist in developing a sustainable and responsible tourism. Responsible tourism actuates to foster a positive interaction between the tourist industry, the local communities and the travelers<sup>32</sup>”, defined by AITR’s<sup>33</sup> members in 2005. The private and public tour operators, the visitors, the community and even the environment comprise the responsible tourism orbit. One has to be careful to cause no harm to environment, socio-cultural set-up and the community should be benefitted equitably. “Responsible tourism is a different way of travelling. It aims not only

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<sup>31</sup> <http://tourism.rajasthan.gov.in/jodhpur#bishnoi-village-tour> last accessed on 18/08/2016

<sup>32</sup> <https://earth-net.eu/what-is-responsible-tourism/definition-of-the-concept/> last accessed on 18/08/2016

<sup>33</sup> Associazione Italiano Turismo Responsabile

to create benefits for the local community but also for the travelers. As meeting and exchanging are at the heart of this concept, ‘responsible tourism’ is beneficial for everyone<sup>34</sup>.”

After Bishnoi Village Safari, we also came across another consistent influx of tourists - largely the Bishnois themselves. This can be called religious travel or pilgrimage. In fact, the infrastructure available at the Bishnoi shrines is due to this segment. The catch is that this is not a commercial segment. The whole organization is without a profit motive. Therefore, it appears best to not touch this mode. Its management is entirely in the hands of the community through volunteer effort and donations.

But what is to be learned from these travelers is the responsibility of the tourists which is major requisite for the participatory model that we shall now discuss. Certain regulations need to be followed by anyone visiting the Bishnoi areas in any capacity. Vegetarian food and non-alcoholic beverages are a must as is a respect for trees, animals and tradition. There is a tourism aphorism that there are no bad travelers, only ill-informed ones. A prior idea of Bishnoi ethics their lifestyle, their strong commitment to nature, their ecology based religion shall go a long way in creating a better experience and a harmonious relationship between the host and the guest.

A huge influx of tourists is not feasible in the interest of the largely rural Bishnoi set-up, but cultural products like jewellery, textiles can travel as their symbols or be put up on sale to augment revenues. A brief entry to fairs and festivals can also be worked out. Although these events are meant for only the members of the community yet a limited participation of tourists will be an attractive option to gain a culturally evocative authentic experience. Everyone regardless of nationality, race, caste, community, religion can participate in

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<sup>34</sup> <https://earth-net.eu/what-is-responsible-tourism/guide-for-the-responsible-traveller-vademecum/> last accessed on 18/08/2016

Bishnoi rituals. Some tourists feel that “Perhaps one would like to organize a trip in such a way that one can mix with the many visitors at the important celebration to the memory of Jambeshwar; this event takes place annually on February/March in Mukam.” (Brockmann and Richler 2004: 41)

Getting an authentic and genuine experience is a target with many tourists opting for cultural tourism. Presently the Bishnoi Safari is combined with a visit to the royal city of Jodhpur. Trips are being organized by different travel agencies and usually start with a long flight to Delhi. After a pause, the journey continues to Jodhpur. Jodhpur is an urban centre of erstwhile royalty. And then the visitors are taken to a campsite in a Bishnoi village. Unfortunately, most visitors report admit being enamoured by the Bishnoi culture while lamenting that now the culture is diminishing.

They feel (as reported to the researcher by several respondents) that the Bishnoi culture is vanishing as so few families are now following this eco-religion. The numbers of the Bishnois may not be the same but they still have a formidable numerical and cultural presence that is not represented adequately in this form of ‘staged authenticity’.

The alternative to this is a family stay instead of a hotel or artificially created camp. There can be day trips or longer stays with families ranging from a day to a month. Bishnoi settlements are scattered in and around Jodhpur, Bikaner Nagaur, Phalaudi, Balotara and Barmer. The trip can be planned to any of these destinations and can also combine two or more places.

Visitors are welcome on one condition that they shall adhere to the Bishnoi ways of protecting nature. “To ensure this, any newcomer will be observed carefully. However, after having been accepted as a friend, he may enjoy the smile of the people, their famous hospitality and participate also in their traditional meals, which consist of cooked vegetables, white cheese, buttermilk,



spices, different breads an impressive quantity of lentils.” (Brockmann and Richler 2004: 40)

The search for authenticity turns the seeker to the experiential mode of tourism. They wish to interact with Bishnoi families. Many of these are not purely tourists. They have multiple identities. They are students or teachers in academic institutes on academic exchange programmes. They are on a short work assignment. And they are trying to get a better feel for the culture of a new place. Hearing about the Bishnois I have realized after many of my talks that the Bishnois trigger the interest of many people. Even when they figure in not a prominent way in lectures, somehow there are more queries about them. The present day materialism has made the Bishnois a symbol of idyllic paradise. Perhaps they illuminate a cultural path that is desirable and ideal in the wake of ecological crisis.

It is rather incredible for a lot of people to know that there is a community that adheres to its traditions and enjoys a symbiotic relationship with nature. The sacred sanctity and pragmatic realization attracts people to know more about them. They always want to talk to the people be a part of their everyday living. Such interested folks feel that modern living is so far-removed from the Bishnoi ideal that it is difficult to absorb everything as an outsider. Therefore, a lot of people aim for an insider perspective.

“Some Bishnoi principles are not so easily understood by foreigners to the culture of the harsh desert climate for which they were designed... The more deeply I understand the culture and context, the more I realise that these rules were created with exceptional common sense as well as profound perception<sup>35</sup>.”

In informal interactions, all Bishnoi families that were asked seemed amenable to the idea as well. They do not have economic motive as the primary aim but

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<sup>35</sup> <https://bishnois.wordpress.com/2010/12/11/bishnois-design-for-life/> last accessed on 19/08/2016

they are proud of their tenets. They want to manifest them and want to create more awareness about environmental balance. It is to be noted that that the Bishnois never ask anyone to convert to their faith. They only expect a commitment to conserve nature and be kind to animals. In this they reflect a remarkably broad vision.

On the basis of these observations we can see that the tourism models do not emerge as neat categories. They do overlap and can be modified to suit individual needs of time, finances, and required intensity of experience.

1. The **Bishnoi Circuit** can be largely based on monuments, shrines and picturesque spots of Bishnoi settlements.
2. The prevalent tourism that goes by the name of **Bishnoi Village Safari** gives a rural-setting camping experience to the tourists.
3. The third mode is **Bishnoi Culture Experience** where the visit of the tourist coincides with the religious ceremonies, fairs, festivals of the Bishnoi community.
4. The final mode is **Living with the Bishnois** for the tourist who wants to know the Bishnois in their natural setting by becoming a part of their everyday living. The tourist who lives with the Bishnois can go out the camp attend fairs and rituals, or visit a few shrines too.

These are the suggested modes that can be further juggled into permutations and combinations suited to individual tourist. The community inputs are crucial to the planning of an integrated model –which may also be worked out with some care.

### **Management - Objectives and Concerns**

“Travelers are more aware now and are more selective in their choice of holiday: they demand greater value more experiences and higher level of quality...There is also a tendency to organize independent holidays outside the

package deal offered by tour operators.” (Trono 2014: 1) Since the target tourist is a knowledge seeker drawn to the cultural set-up of the Bishnois, the tourism on offer should be a mixed plate or a ‘mixable’ one. The idea underlying this study is to ensure agency for the community, first and foremost but also ensuring agency for the tourists.

The objectives of Bishnoi tourism can be a little more than a commercial activity and can incorporate the perspectives of both the visitors and the visited. Some of the objectives and concerns that arise out of Bishnoi tourism can be stated as follows:

- To showcase the unique ecological Bishnoi practices as an alternative to current global crisis of environment
- To provide an authentic experience of the Bishnoi culture to the tourists
- To encourage preservation of Bishnoi cultural heritage through tourism
- To ensure that the community members have an equitable share in the revenue
- To ensure that the community has a say in tourism influx and design of tourism model
- To manage tourists in a way that it does not disturb the traditional culture
- To provide a platter of some tourism offers to suit individual tourist needs
- To provide a market through tourism for traditional products
- To preserve the traditional knowledge around intangible cultural heritage
- To provide a new lease of life to Bishnoi ecological livelihood in the wake of inroads of modernity
- To encourage solutions to contemporary challenges within the framework of Bishnoi tenets

## **Participants and Stakeholders**

Tourists and the community members are the two most significant stakeholders for Bishnoi tourism. The other players include the private tour operators, Tourism Department of the Government of Rajasthan, and Akhil Bharatiya Bishnoi Mahasabha.

Private tour operators have been selling Bishnoi tours for quite some time now an organization of the Bishnois that manages all the shrines, community groves, animal shelters etc. They have been marketing it and have the offers posted on their own website and even other popular travel sites. In the present times the client is more likely to look up the internet for booking and planning a trip. The private tour operators have an expertise and also play to the needs of the market.

There is one other player on the internet. The Tourism department of the Government of Rajasthan also offers a Bishnoi Village Safari. The offer appears only a replica of the private tours integrated as many attractions in and around Jodhpur. It lacks imagination creativity and originality. It is a big sector of the Government and more should be done at the policy level towards Bishnoi tourism.

The Akhil Bharatiya Bishnoi Mahasabha is an organization of the Bishnoi community that elects its officials to take care of the interests of the community. All the logistics and other facilities, the accommodation food arrangements animal shelters, sacred groves are managed by this organization on behalf of the community. The domestic and community pilgrims on auspicious occasions gather on Bishnoi shrines in large numbers. The arrangements to facilitate these numerous visitors are a marvel. Even occasional visitors like the researcher and many others are hosted by this organization with a lot of warmth.

This organization is not operating any tourism-related commercial activity but is well-equipped to do so. They have control over infrastructure and an empathy with community interest. They seem amenable to the idea of being a part of a

responsible tourism circuit. There must be ways to involve it as a partner in any other model as well.

The tourists can exercise agency through demand to rework the tourism market. The case of Bishnois, where the entry-point is a fascination of a cultural trajectory away from the royal Rajasthan, makes such possibilities imaginable.

The Bishnoi community, which is the most crucial component, seems to be the least visible as a major player in decision-making. They are showcased in a way that they do not participate in the process much. They are rather objects of interest. They are very welcoming and hospitable to all the visitors. Even when private tour operators take their clients around Bishnoi villages they are charmed by the community's simplicity. Many reviewers wrote that they were enchanted by the heritage products of arts and crafts but were happy that they were not under any pressure to buy.

The community, especially for a model of longer home-stays must be an equal level economic player. Certain villages can form a co-operative society to organize tourism and benefit from it.

The heritage products of the Bishnois and traditional events have not yet been exposed into the tourism discourse in a big way. The arts and crafts and related skills and knowledge are still well-preserved. They should also be showcased in a more structured and organized manner.

Since the tour operators have the technical knowledge and the community has the lifestyle to offer some models on public-private partnerships can also be developed.

These are some of the concerns that aim to make Bishnoi tourism a representative and equitable enterprise. It should aim to be an authentic presentation to create awareness as well as preserve the ethos of sustainable

livelihood. The models should be economically profitable but the resources and revenue should not be limited to few hands. There should be a fair distribution of financial gains. The artisans and craftsmen should be able to market not only their products but skills. In the course of tourism development care must be taken to monitor the impact of tourism. There should not be ill-informed travelers unable to keep pace with Bishnoi values. It can create a serious rift. The tourists should be provided with promised amenities of basic hospitality standards. Hopefully once the pace picks up supporting paraphernalia shall also come up.

Bishnois are not merely a symbol of exotic past as what most of the tourism promos project them as. Nor are they only a manifestation of ‘unchanging past’. They present before us an evolution of beliefs lifestyle and activism – a tradition in tune with the changing times.

The Bishnois have created a monument to commemorate the tree-huggers of Khejarli. An annual fair is held to strengthen the community’s resolve towards environment. This ritual is also made more meaningful by planting Three hundred and sixty three saplings every year to commemorate each martyr. The Bishnois have formed an organization to protect all living beings called *Akhil Bharatiya Bishnoi Jeev Raksha Samiti*. They can be seen in the forefront of protests against environmental breaches. Indian environmental activism cannot be understood in terms of environmentalism alone. It is a cultural critique in a broad sense having deep roots in Indian civilization; it gets intimately bound up with issues of

In an ideal universe, tourism and Bishnois would develop a beautifully mutually sustaining relationship like the Bishnois and nature. One has to admit though that the road ahead seems to be fraught with difficulties. Careful planning and sensitive execution are required if one even claims to strive for these ideals. The

management of tourism has to keep the interest of the community as a priority without shortchanging the experience of the tourists. Hopefully, the various models devised and critical issues highlighted, augur a great ‘journey’ ahead – both metaphorically and literally.



Figure 14 From My Social Network Site



Figure 15 Posts that invited Many Tourist Inquiries



Figure 16 Natives found it difficult to believe that this is Rajasthan





Entrance to Mukam – the shrine where Guru Jambheshwar was buried



Provision for Holy Fire in temples



Objects used by Guru Jambheshwar, Lohawat



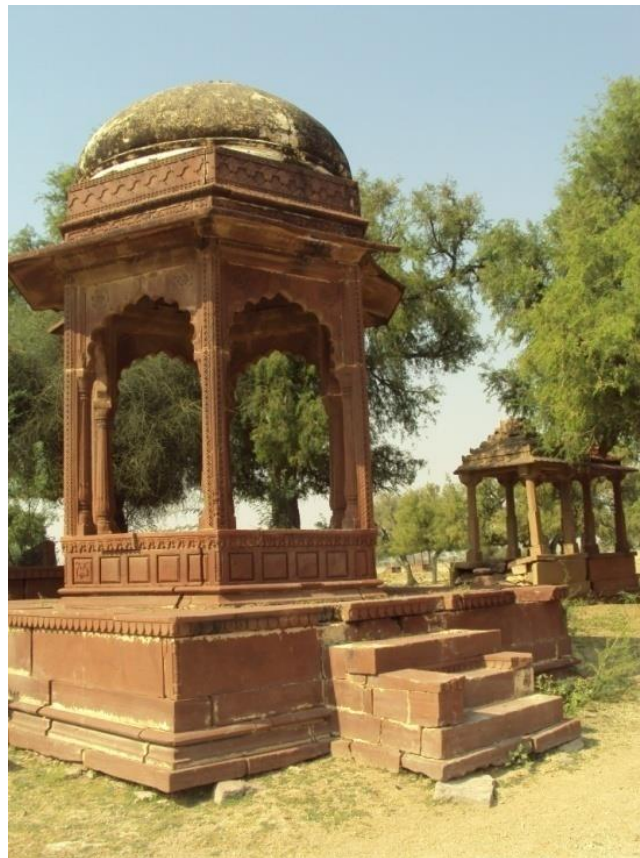
Some more objects used by Jambho ji



Some neglected historical structures in these areas



Canopies to provide shade



Specimen of Regional Architecture

## **CHAPTER VI**

### **THE ROAD AHEAD: AVOIDING THE PITFALLS**

**C**ultural Tourism can be defined as “the movement of persons to cultural attractions away from their normal place of residence, with the intention to gather new information and experiences to satisfy their cultural needs.” Bishnoi tourism is envisaged as gaining an experience of a cultural community. The experience primarily focuses on ecological practices of the Bishnois reflected in their unique relationship with nature and landscape. The intangible heritage comprising of arts crafts fairs and festivals enriches the cultural mosaic. It is not a surprise that the Bishnois are inviting a lot of attention in the tourism market.

Although the Bishnois can emerge as an attractive and popular tourist destination, it has to be remembered that geography is a limited resource and culture an irreplaceable one. So, as we talk about developing Bishnoi tourism we also have to be alert to preserving local knowledge and indigenous culture. One has to remember that the Bishnois developed a living culture in tune with the needs of their community. It should not be reduced to a mere tourist object.

It has to be remembered that the Bishnois are an ever-changing community. They are a part of our contemporary world. They are manifesting nuggets of an older wisdom of ecological sanity as lived reality. It holds attraction for many people understanding and grappling with ravages of environmental crisis. It is not a relic of the past but a wise and vulnerable present that needs to be handled with care and sensitivity.

Tourism has often been linked to economic development. It is important to keep in mind that the economic benefits of tourism do not increase inequalities, economic problems, and social tensions.

The road ahead to Bishnoi tourism must engage the community not as an object but as a subject as well. There are three main aspects that need to be underscored as the basis of policy formulation.

**Firstly**, the tourism models have to be developed to suit the different needs of the tourists. As the main attraction for the tourists is the identity of the Bishnois as “the first environmentalists of the world”, most tourists, if not all, are looking for glimpses of ecological sanity more than anything else. The other colourful and interesting aspects of the Bishnoi culture are enchanting and can be incorporated to enrich the experience of the tourists. Thus a variant profile of the tourist and the offers appear more conducive to market strategies and more representative of their cultural heritage. In the context of Bishnois it appears that the tourists hanker after ‘authentic experiences’ (MacCannell, 1973) rather than superficial, contrived experiences of ‘pseudo-events’ (Boorstin, 1964) in ‘hyper-reality’. (Eco, 1986)

**Secondly**, while striving to present an authentic experience to the tourists, the perspective of the community must also be taken into consideration. Their sensibilities and cultural ethos have to be understood and followed by the visitors. The Bishnois are an example of sustainable living. Similarly Bishnoi tourism should develop as sustainable tourism. There should no harm to the culture, landscape and ecological balance and negative impact on the human-nature relationship should also be prevented.

**Thirdly**, the distributive economy of tourism must be given importance. As community is the primary mainstay of this whole tourism enterprise, it should also result in community’s economic betterment. Where the tourism management is concentrated in few hands, the local community makes appearance as wage labourers or petty entrepreneurs. The base of Bishnoi tourism should aim to be broad and inclusive. Bishnoi tourism is brimming with



immense potential with its own share of challenge and limitations but it is necessary to touch upon all these aspects to arrive at an overview.

### **Many Tourists, Many Destinations**

Culture is not just a set of received notions. The understanding and the orientation of the tourist is also a significant factor. There are many determinants to devising a tourism model. Usually, tourism leads to a business model with a favourable cost-benefit ratio. Without disregarding the profit motive, more creative effort is required to make Bishnoi tourism more culturally representative. I have been arguing that the cultural heritage of Rajasthan is not adequately represented in the tourism discourse. Bishnoi tourism, as a way to remedy this shortcoming must not fall prey to it.

The notion of cultural tourism has come a long way breaking away from the stereotyped elitist interpretations moving beyond the confining terms like ‘high culture’. Culture is no longer a symbol of power as it becomes subject to more democratic and inclusive interpretations. The existing offers for Bishnoi tourism have not been able to break the shackles of an ongoing ‘orientalist’ and ‘sepatacleist’ discourse.

As we see the Bishnoi Village Safari, offered privately and by Government body, seems to take pride in an artificially created royal connection. The Bishnois laying no claim on royalty, the tour is said to be a ‘brainchild’ of the so-called emperors. The effort is also directed to create a spectacle, taking the tourists to a camping site, a lake with wildlife abounding in the vicinity. This is supplemented with a quick tour affording surreptitious glances over Bishnoi settlements, capped with a visit to arts and crafts shops in rural setting. Such a plan is sufficient to tick all the boxes in the tourist’s list but the experience is vicarious but superficial at best.

The observation and interaction with tourists reveal that they undergo a more transformative experience when they are able to participate in the ordinary Bishnoi living. They absorb the ethos and understand the implications. The promise of ecological sustainability through a Bishnoi way of life generates awe and wonder. By observing it at close quarters the awe is replaced by optimistic possibilities of adopting it or being influenced by it. It becomes a different learning experience.

Thus, we should rather have few different models for Bishnoi tourism on platter, within which there should be space for various permutations and combinations. This is done not only in accordance with the convenience of the tourists but also to make the community better represented in the tourism paradigm. For this the Bishnoi tourism should strive to be both accessible and creatively presented.

### **Responsible Tourism, Community Empowerment**

Tourism is a service industry where the amicable hosts are a big draw. The Bishnois are inherently a hospitable community. In the desert of Thar, where water is a scarce resource, it is considered a sin to refuse anyone for water. The Bishnois are very sensitive and careful in taking care of the basic need of any visitor. They will always offer food and water. I travelled extensively in various Bishnoi villages without any food or water, no restaurants in sight yet I was always assured of simple meal always served joyfully.

The Bishnois are more than happy to recount the tales of the dedication of their community towards environment. They would take painstaking efforts to show you around their neat, thatched habitations. The entry is free in the kitchens and open spaces where vegetables are left to be sun-dried to be used in the times of scarcity. The support of the community towards tourism largely rises from the pride in their tenets and a desire to showcase them for the outside world.

The participation of the community is regarded as a benchmark of good practices in cultural tourism studies. The friendliness of the hosts is considered as one of the most attractive features of cultural tourism. “Furthermore, involvement in planning is likely to result in more appropriate decisions and greater motivation on the part of the local people (Hitchcock, 1993) and protection of the environment is more likely to be supported (Tourism Concern, 1992).” (Cole, 2005:94)

By achieving these two goals we need to supplement it with responsible tourism. The impact of tourism should be periodically monitored. It is common observation that the communities lose their originality by tailoring its presentation to the expectations of the tourists. The challenge lies in achieving socio-economic development of the community presented for tourism without making them lose their cultural distinctness.

Much emphasis is now-a-days being laid to the norms of behavior for the tourist. As in any other place tourists should be careful in not harming the environment by littering etc. They should also not disturb the ecological balance of these areas and adhere to core Bishnoi values of vegetarianism and compassion for all things living. Tourism can impact the culture positively by bringing the community together in presenting local traditions. It also has a great potential to reinforce pride in their culture and facilitate its preservation and continuity. Culture is an evolving entity and shall hopefully attain a contemporary relevance through tourism.

The distinct cultural identity can serve as tourism capital for the community. The community approach to tourism as other important facets too. Murphy (1985:118) discussed the social carrying capacity of the host community to absorb tourism. Many studies since Murphy have emphasised the role of community in planning as their right. (Simmons, 1994) This should result in



better interpretation of their culture, which is itself a tourism product and shall encourage empowerment and equitable development.

This report strongly advocates – **Community Participation** and **Responsible Tourism**.

### **Community Participation**

The development of a community can be achieved more successfully through participation. The communities are more aware of the problems and should have a role in resolving them. The community dimension to tourism is significant for achieving development goals.

The participation of the community should also be inclusive and bring about equitable development. Tourism has many economic benefits. “The emphasis here, however, is not on whether tourism is economically advantageous in aggregate terms, but to whom these advantages accrue. This would require a more creative, flexible and rotational approach. In one tourism experience, only a limited number of families can participate. This should be rotational and voluntary. Further the management of tourism circuit should have an integrated approach where community is not subordinate. Their knowledge, culture and hospitality must be given adequate place in market strategies.

The government policy should be more pro-active in providing technical knowledge and infrastructure facilities for the communities to develop tourism. Bishnois are a sturdy community that faces ravages of harsh desert conditions in solidarity. They are the right people to develop community tourism. Internationally it is understood that the involvement of local community in the development of tourism not only looks good on paper but is essential to procure funding. Unfortunately, the government of Rajasthan shows no preference for

community involvement in providing facilities for development of tourism<sup>36</sup> (*Rajasthan Tourism Unit Policy* 2015). There should a policy stand to support Bishnoi tourism in a way that it leads to community participation and empowerment.

Culture is intrinsically a subject of interpretation. Each culture interprets symbols and events in its own way. Tourism is based on the experiences which can be unique to each visitor. This brings us to the issue of authenticity. The interest of the tourism business lies in adapting the culture in accordance with the sensibilities of the tourists. The Bishnois have so far not been subject to such tailoring but many other folk traditions of Rajasthan manifest this tendency. The folk performances are shortened incorporate tropes of mainstream popular culture to appeal to the taste of the tourists. The emphasis on the participation of the community is very important. There should be respect for indigenous perspectives on authenticity and one should not shy away from discussion around it. There should be such monitoring forums where the voice of the various stakeholders can be heard periodically.

Although tourism is an activity that can be assessed in economic terms alone yet there is an effort towards creating social responsibility. There has been a huge spate of discussion on whether tourism is a curse or blessing, boon or blight. There is immense risk in subject a community, which is a valuable cultural resource, such as the Bishnois, to such confusion. It is better to ensure that the ills of the industry do not corrode the cultural resource. Tourism should take a clue from the resourcefulness of Bishnoi culture to create a win-win situation.

### **Suggestions to avoid pitfalls**

#### **1. Involvement of community in designing**

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<sup>36</sup>[http://www.rajasthantourism.gov.in/App\\_Themes/Green/NewHotel%20Policy/Tourism%20Unit%20Policy%202015.pdf](http://www.rajasthantourism.gov.in/App_Themes/Green/NewHotel%20Policy/Tourism%20Unit%20Policy%202015.pdf) last accessed on 1/09/2016

2. Involvement of community in operating
3. Periodic impact evaluation
4. Feedback of tourists
5. Involvement of community through co-operative societies in government tourism programmes

## AFTERWORD

*There is an extensive country in the sky  
With the superstitious carpets of the rainbow  
And with vesperal vegetation;  
Towards there I journey, not without a certain fatigue,  
Treading on earth disturbed by rather fresh tombs  
I dream among those plants of tangled vegetation*

**Pablo Neruda, *Dream Horse***

When I floated the idea of developing the Bishnoi community as a destination for cultural tourism it did not find much acceptance among my academic partners. The religious ecology, the scenic landscapes, and the warm hospitality, together did garner a more than enthusiastic response. But all the people who showed interest shared a suspicion and discomfort about developing commercial tourism. We were all not sure that this type of tourism is commercially viable leading to the issues of finding a niche market. The discomfort was rooted in the belief that the touch of commerce shall sully the pristine simplicity of the Bishnoi culture.

Subsequently I had to deal with two questions - whether there is a tourism market and whether there should be tourism for the Bishnois. As a researcher for a project titled 'Engaging the Bishnoi Community for Cultural Tourism in Rajasthan', I should be strongly rooting for both the possibilities. I guess the reader of this whole report deserves an honest answer. I confess that I was treading on unsure grounds but I saw a connection between the two threads of suspicion. I secretly thought to myself that a limited market is the best thing if tourism can cause any harm to the Bishnoi culture. I was ready to experiment and face defeat but not push the tourism agenda on the Bishnois

indiscriminately. This concern is at the core of the community-centric approach of this work.

Though later as I delved deeply into the literature on tourism, I was first drawn to safeguard and promote the interests of the community. What was happening in the tourism market in the context of Bishnoi tourism did not place the community in the foreground though it was being used as a promotional commodity. The tourism market has packaging at its core to sell the product. As I mentioned earlier also, the packaging, meant to make the cultural heritage more attractive, can result in faking it. In the case of the Bishnois this appeared to be the case. This took me back to the role of the community, and it reaffirmed my belief that they should have a bigger role in the tourism enterprise.

I spent a lot of time in the Bishnoi villages around Nokha in Bikaner, Phalaudi in Jodhpur and Pokharan in Barmer. I had always been attracted by the Bishnoi philosophy and its implementation but staying with the practitioners melted my heart completely. The innocence of the villagers, their eager-to-please demeanours, their going-out-of-the way to make you comfortable tugs at your heart. At times like these, with a plate full of sweet *halwa* palced before me, I wondered who would not want to come to them.

Meticulous care is always taken to keep the surroundings clean. The thatched huts have open courtyards, jotted with ambling deer and fluttering peacocks, children running about and man and women joyfully tend to chores. Women lay out desert vegetables for sun-drying and men heedfully store each straw of hay to be used in times of scarcity is a moving sight. The atmosphere is enlivened by the mellifluous notes of folk songs. On a personal level, the cultural experience had a transformative effect on my consciousness.

I felt a strong bond with nature. I was no longer awestruck by the presence of numerous peacocks around a water body in the midst of an otherwise landscape. I felt peace, tranquility and a strange sense of ease. The strife, stress,

competition arising from a sense of urgency to get tasks accomplished seemed to have vanished. I cherished each tree, each drop of water, each bird, and each doe-eyed gaze. Perhaps, one has to rediscover the human-nature relationship to understand its full import. With a renewed commitment to maintaining ecological balance, my respect and love for the Bishnoi people strengthened.

The people showed a lot of interest in my work. They were very happy that the life and philosophy of the Bishnois is being showcased and felt proud to be a part of this project. I shared my objective with them over a period of time, first, trying to know them and build a relationship of trust. They felt very proud of their culture and their fierce dedication was humbling. They feel that the community is capable of anything. If they could transform the adversities of desert to a bountiful living, they can do anything. In fact, now many Bishnois are in the transport business and many of the trucks have 'Bishnoi Power' or 'Jambh Power' painted on them, a formidable force to move any obstacle.

Once I shared my purpose with them, they were very encouraging and did a variety of things to help me. They gave me a lot of literature - both religious and academic. They would accompany me to various sites to explain the cultural significance. I was taken to various houses to interact with different men and women to have a more representative profile of the respondents. I was handed a few phone numbers to consult any of them, when I was at crossroads of interpreting a Bishnoi cultural nuance. We did three pilot runs of the various modes of Bishnoi tourism – the Village Safari, Short Home Stay and Religious Shrines with Mukam Fair. I had a mechanism in place for these tours entirely with the help of these ingenious people. These tours resolved the first doubt for me. There definitely was a market as well as infrastructure for Bishnoi tourism.

I remember while attending a Bishnoi marriage at Mukam, I needed to interact with both men and women in a shared space. The younger married women had covered their faces with veils. They were in their best fineries for the occasion. I

found, whatever little that could be seen from beneath the veils, breathtakingly beautiful. I wanted to capture images of their half-moon nose rings, multi-  
pendant necklaces, ornate forehead bands and the gleeful smiles. Even after repeated requests, the women refused to remove the *odhna* covering their faces. Every time I would repeat my request they would all break into laughter and stealthily looked at a septuagenarian sitting under a tree.

He looked very amused by the situation and finally came to my rescue. He pleasantly chided all these women to pose for my camera. He urged them not to be conscious of him, to look their best, the way Bishnoi women always do. I was very happy to get their co-operation, willing approval by the community. They seek honour in community identity.

Tourism had already emerged as a distinct possibility from the tourist perspective and it should be developed to recreate the magic of Bishnois. The interest of the community should be central to the practice of Bishnoi tourism. The task is not complete and the journey is yet to reach the destination. The cultural tourism in Rajasthan with the Bishnoi community is full of promise. The veil has been lifted and optimism runs high. Let's give it a chance!

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## APPENDIX

### EXTRACTS

#### MARWAR CENSUS 1891 AND PANJAB CENSUS, 1881

*The Castes of Marwar being Census Report of 1891* by Munshi Hardayal Singh, Census Superintendent of Marwar, first published in 1894 by order of the Marwar Durbar, includes the Bishnois in “Minor Agricultural Castes”.

#### BISHNOI

The Bishnois have been returned as 40 023 in Marwar. They were originally Jats and owe the foundation of their sect to Jambhoji a Punwar Rajput who was born in 1451 AD and led the life of an ascetic and a celibate. He is said to have performed many miracles. In 1487 when a famine broke out in Nagor and about 800 Jats were emigrating he arrived there and with a maund of grain he fed them for three years. This led the conversion of the Jats to Vishnuism Jambhoji being regarded by them as an incarnation of Vishnu and hence the origin of the name Bishnoi. Another interpretation of the word is that as the doctrines of the new creed numbered 29 or in other words *bis* (twenty) and *nau* (nine) the adherents of the sect therefore came to be called as Bishnois.

They are numerous in Marwar only and have the same clans or sub divisions among them as the Jats. Widows are also allowed to contract *Nata*. Their chief occupation is cultivation and they also keep large number of camels. In their rites and ceremonies they partake of both Hindu and Musalman religion. The following extract from the Punjab census report of 1881 will fully explain the tenet and practice of the Bishnois –

They (Bishnois) abstain entirely from animal food and have a peculiarly strong regard of animal life, refusing as a rule to accompany a sporting party. They look upon tobacco as unclean in all its form, they bury their dead at full length

usually at the threshold of the house itself or in adjoining cattle-shed or in a sitting posture. Like the Hindu Sanyasis they shave off the *choti* or scalp-lock and they usually clothe themselves in wool as being at all times pure. They are more particular about ceremonial purity than even the Hindu and their marriages mingle Mohamedon with Hindu forms, verses of the Quran being read as well as passages of the *Shastras* and the *pheras* or circumambulation of the sacred fire being apparently omitted. (p. 48-49)

### **Extracts from *Panjab Census Report, 1881***

This report is also referred by the Marwar Census and it has the customs of Bishnois in some detail. The Panjab Census Report, 1881, by Denzil C J Ibbetson, published in 1883 by Government Press, Lahore, records the Bishnois as “Minor Hindu Castes” in the section titled “Marwar Castes, Tribes, Races.”

242. After these came the Bishnois, found only in Hissar and Sirsa districts, their sect is founded by a Rajput of Bikaner, who was born in 1451 AD. , and was therefore a contemporary of Guru Nanak, the originator of Sikhism, and is buried in Samruthal in Bikaner. His spiritual name was Jambhaji. He left his followers a scriptures in the Nagari characters called *Subdbani*. The adherents of the sect are descendants of immigrants from Bikaner and are almost exclusively Jats or carpenters by caste though they often abandon the caste name and describe themselves exclusively as Bishnois. They marry among themselves, are good cultivators and keep large number of camels. They have a ceremonial initiation somewhat similar to and known by the same name as the Sikhs. Their priests are apparently drawn from among themselves, and are, as with the Hindus, divided into the regular religious class and the secular clergy; and the priesthood is not hereditary. They worship Jambhaji, who is regarded as an incarnation of Vishnuji; they abstain entirely from animal food... (Vol.1, p.123)

Footnote 1. The Bishnois of Bijnaur in the North-Western Provinces are almost exclusively traders and are generally regarded as a sub-division of the Banya caste. They respect the Quran and generally incline towards Islam, though now less so than formerly. (*Vol.1, p.123*)

501. The Bishnoi (Caste No. 106) – The Bishnois are really a religious sect and not a tribal religion. Their tenets and practices have been briefly sketched on page 123 in the Chapter on Religion. Most of the followers of the sect are Jats or Tarkhans by caste, and come from the Bagar or Bikaner, but on becoming Bishnoi, they very commonly gave up their caste name and called themselves only by the new creed. This is, however, not always so; and many of the Bishnois will doubtless have returned themselves under their caste names. I do not know whether the Jat and Trakhan Bishnoi intermarry or not. But a Bishnoi will only marry a Bishnoi. They are only found in Harriana and are all Hindus. (*Vol. 1, p. 303*)