



**HelpAge**  
International

**Gravis**



# *Drought Lives*

*Older people of the Thar Desert tell their stories*



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### **Editor's note**

The Thar Desert of Rajasthan in India has suffered at the hands of droughts for a number of centuries. Arid conditions caused by drought years have led to poverty and underdevelopment in the region. The impoverished communities of the Thar have shown great spirit in fighting with the conditions and in struggling for existence. In spite of unfavorable conditions and hardships of life, the Thar Desert community is well-knit and welcomes the challenges in life.

Older People of the Thar live in extremely difficult conditions. With very little water and food, negligible vegetation and scarcely available healthcare facilities, the Older People of the Thar are malnourished, impoverished and neglected. The community of Older People in their years of past has shown great resilience in combating droughts in the region. GRAVIS in recent years has done a lot of work to organize Older People, identify their capacities and develop them further and make them an integral part of the developmental process.

This study focuses on gathering Older People's experiences in the context of droughts in the Thar and suggests some action-points for the time to come. We hope that the study will be able to highlight Older People's plights in drought conditions and their role in remedial measures.

**Dr. Prakash Tyagi**

### **Authors' note**

India is known for its traditional, culture and diverse features from which many other societies are usually devoid of. The joint family system is one of the qualities of the Indian culture, because it strengthens the relation between family members and hence enforces mutual commitment. But unfortunately this system is converting gradually into a nuclear family system due to some particular reasons. Most of the times, the reason is financial..

But all these reasons are mere justifications advocating our self-centeredness. In the process we drain out enough of our vitals eroding the energies needed to remain focused on modern development. Our senior citizens are the integral part of a developing society and their experiences are the investments during the course of evolution of new ideas and modern technologies. Neglecting this means failing to decipher the practical import accompanying their participation.

This study concentrates upon older people's experiences in context of drought in the Thar Desert so as to identify the strategies to cope with such conditions. If our total energies are trained at the task ahead, the probability of touching the target would obviously be greater. Thus we need to act in collaboration with the elderly and proceed judiciously if we wish to make a success.

**Mahitosh Bagoria**  
**Maike Gorsboth**

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## Introduction

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"Never does famine come alone. A dearth of good ideas and good actions comes first" says well-known environmentalist, Anupam Mishra. The vulnerability of the people towards drought has increased with the passage of time. Drought is not a new phenomenon in the context of Rajasthan. People have become accustomed to the occurrence of drought and have evolved self-sustaining systems and mechanisms to deal with drought over time. Nevertheless, in the recent decades the trend of development and relief work has led to the disintegration of the traditional survival systems and mechanisms. People are becoming more and more dependent on the government and its relief measures during the times of drought. Booming population, urbanization and lack of drought mitigation activities with a long-term vision contribute to the complexity of situation.

Droughts in Rajasthan are a common feature and occur intermittently. The government efforts have been able to provide immediate relief in some areas, but have failed to provide drought mitigation in long-term. The NGOs have also made a significant contribution in improving the scenario; however, their efforts also need to be strengthened further.

About 32,000,000,000 - 32 billion rupees - that is the amount of money the State and Central Governments have spent only on immediate drought relief in Rajasthan during the last 20 years. Add the money spent on



Drudgery of women for water in the Thar

infrastructure and other drought and development related measures and you will even arrive at a much larger sum. A lot of money has been invested since independence in order to improve the conditions of people's lives, especially in the western part of Rajasthan, the area often known as the Thar Desert.

How have money and other efforts changed the way people live during the last 50 years? It is primarily this question that this compilation of stories intends to shed light on. To find an answer, we decided to ask the very people who have witnessed changes taking place over time in their own lives, especially the older people of the Thar. We could have also tried to trace the changes and trends of the past 50 years or so by presenting and analysing facts and statistics. But this has already been done in other books. Furthermore, statistics are impersonal. Aggregated data and average means do not tell us much about the worries and fears, nor about the happiness and joy of those many individuals who are hidden behind these numbers.

Our interviewees are all older people from the Thar Desert who have looked back into their own experiences and have told us about how they feel about the developments of the past. Some of the people we talked to are old enough to even remember the struggle for Independence and to have experienced the turmoil of partition.

The state of Rajasthan is situated in the north-western part of India. It is the largest state in terms of area and is the home to more than 55 million people, or 5.49% of India's whole population. More than half of Rajasthan is made up of the Great Indian Desert, known as the Thar Desert. Despite these hard climatic conditions, there are more than 110 persons per square kilometre living in the Thar Desert. This makes Thar the most densely populated arid zone in the world. In most parts of the western plains, the average annual rainfall is much lower (average normal rainfall data) and extremely erratic.

For the whole of Rajasthan, in the years between 1951 and 2003, 48 years have been drought years, meaning that there was less precipitation than on average. The severity of droughts varied from light to severe. It is surprising that with

all the hardships of high winds, scorching heat, no perennial water source, low humidity, low vegetation and regular droughts, rural inhabitants (above 60%) in the desert are generating their livelihood from rain-fed agriculture and cattle rearing. Most of them are small & marginal farmers and are most vulnerable to the effects of drought on livelihood and health care.

### **Rationale and Methodology of the study**

The study attempts compile the experiences of communities living in the Thar Desert in the context of droughts, and especially of Older People, and draw key conclusions. The field work in terms of gathering information and collecting experiences was done in the rural areas of the Thar Desert, in the districts of Badmer and Jodhpur. It is the rural areas which see the worst impacts of drought; hence the focus was strictly on rural areas.

A representative study was not our objective, neither was a strict and scientific analysis of programmes implemented by the government and NGOs. Of course, this is a very subjective approach and in no way representative. What we were hoping for, was to give the reader some idea, a feeling for what abstract trends and statistics might mean at the individual level of those people whose lives they reflect and obscure at the same time

The selection of interviewees and of the issues to discuss with them was also not random. We did have certain general issues in mind that we hoped to illustrate against the background of people's personal experiences. You will find a different focus, on drought relief, water management and water use, migration and on other issues, in each case. Of course, we were also biased in the sense that we were looking for people whose stories reflected some of the larger developments of the past 50 years.

Both single interviews as well as group discussions were conducted, altogether 15 interviews were done. Since, naturally such a small selection of cases cannot present an overview of overall aspects of the developments and policies of the past 50 years; we have tried to tie them back into a broader context.

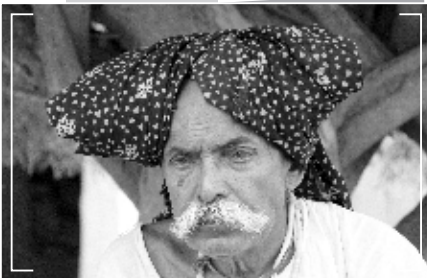
## Where there is water, there is life.

**Radhey Shyam**  
Ugras, Phalodi Block

The story goes that village of Ugras was found when a king lost one of his horses. Sitting in the shade of a big khejri tree and surrounded by his family, 80-years old Radhey Shyam tells us how this happened. "300 years ago, this was all forest area. King Sangar then used to hunt here." Several wells were built where the King and his hunting parties could find rest and get some water. Then, one day one of the King's horses was lost and people came here to search for the horse. Some of them noticed the wells and decided to stay for good. More people followed them. "People go where water is available. So people came to Ugras," Radhey Shyam concludes.

Whether true or not, the story of the foundation of Ugras demonstrates the importance of water in this area. Accordingly, the whole village community used to feel the responsibility of taking care jointly of the community water sources. In Ugras, only a short while after the wells, a *naadi* (pond) was also built. The

construction was done by members of the Paliwal caste. However, until after independence, the *naadi* was maintained by the community as a whole. About every three to five years when the *naadi* was lying dry, its desilting was organized. During the Holi festival in March, some money



Radhey Shyam has seen it all

was collected from every family. “Every family had to contribute about three rupees” Radhey Shyam remembers. From this money, food like *ghughri* and roasted gram was provided to those community members who desilted the *naadi*.



An abundant well in Ugras village

“From the higher caste families only one family member would come to the desilting of the *naadi*. But the lower caste families had to send two people.” Radhey Syham points out that joint community maintenance did not mean that everybody would be

treated equally and participate on equal footing. And caste discrimination back then not only showed in the desilting of the *naadi*. Wells were also not equally accessible to all. “Members of the higher caste would get water first” directly after it had been hauled from the well. Those from the lower castes like Radhey Shyam had to wait for water at the lower basin. “One time, my father and my mother needed to get water for their livestock from a well. When they got there, there was nobody from a higher caste to give them the water.” So they took it themselves. Unfortunately, somebody saw them. People came; they insulted and threatened Radhey Shyam's parents. They returned home with their pitchers broken.

“Today, caste is not such a big issue as it used to be.” Radhey Shyam certainly is not unhappy about this. But he does find it unfortunate that the community-based management and maintenance of water resources also only lasted until some time after independence. Then the desilting of the *naadi* was



An old well of Ugras

made part of the government and NGO relief work. Later tube wells were built, many of them with the help of government subsidies. Piped water has been increasingly provided. “For the last 25 years the old wells have not been in use,” tells us Radhey Shyam. “And the traditional *beris*, which usually do not belong to the community but to individual families, face the same fate. Several of about 35 *beris* that you can find in Ugras lack maintenance. On the other hand, there are now about 30 tube wells, most of which belong to higher caste families who use them to irrigate water-intensive cash crops.”

Radhey Shyam's family does not have its own tube well. They belong to a Scheduled Caste and neither do they own much land nor much money. Their land is not irrigated, and the drinking water for their livestock is still provided by the community's *naadi*. During droughts, the family has to participate in relief work and some of the family members will migrate. Still, there is one trouble that they do not share with so many other families in similar situations - the trouble of getting sufficient and safe drinking water. For several decades now, this has been provided by the family's own *beri*. “My grandfather built it some 100 years ago.” Ever since then, Radhey Shyam and his family have gotten their drinking water from this *beri*. When the village's *naadi* is dry, the *beri* even provides water for their livestock. According to

Radhey Shyam, the water from the *beri* is sweet and since its construction it has never been dry because of proper maintenance and close proximity to a *khadin's* catchment. Every three to five years, they take care of its desilting. The family also has access to a government tube well in the village, only one kilometre away from their house. But their *beri* is still closer, right next to their house. And Radhey Shyam prefers the water from the *beri*. “The salty water from the tube well we only use for bathing and for washing our clothes.”



Beri in their field

Some 30 more families also depend on the *beri* for drinking water. For Radhey Shyam, it is clear that he should never take money from those families who come to their *beri* to get water for themselves or their cows. He regards the water from the *beri* as a gift of God that he should share with others, not make profit from.

“During my entire life, I have relied on this *beri*. It has always been sufficient for me and my family. But when I die, maybe nobody is going to keep it going.” It is probably a justified fear that Radhey Shyam tells us about. He tells us that many people today find it more easy and comfortable to just spend the Rs. 150 or 200 for a tanker of drinking water, sparing themselves the effort of hauling water and maintaining structures such as *beris*. And they know that during droughts the government will provide water with tankers.

Already, some of the *beris* existing in Ugras are no longer used and have been neglected. Radhey Shyam worries about this. He criticises that people have become increasingly dependent on government schemes and on the market. “They are no longer self-dependent. Cooperation at the community level has also broken down. And more and more water is wasted.”

## Evergreen agriculture?

**Sanga Singh**  
Rayda, Phalodi Block

The intense green of the field close to Sanga Singh's house contrasts stunningly with the otherwise sandy and dusty surroundings. It's the end of June, and it's hot. A few days later there will be the first rain of the year in this area. It will be "good rain" and it comes quite early, too, compared to the previous years. But right now and here, all too literally speaking in the middle of the desert, the plants are already standing high and gently moving in the wind.

How this can be? Eight years ago, the family of Sanga Singh sold 100 *bighas* of their land and spent most of the money on the construction of a tube well. The water from this tube well now serves them with drinking water and with water for irrigation of the remaining 150 *bighas* of land. Prior to the construction of the well, harvest and a great part of the family's income were entirely rain-dependent. "In the past we used to grow *bajra*, *moong*, *joar*, *guar*", the 83 years old Sanga Singh tells us. Traditional drought resistant food crops that the family members would also eat themselves.

Today, after having installed the tube well, his sons grow so-called "cash crops": - wheat, chilli and green vegetables. They are called cash crops because



Sharing concerns: Sanga Singh



they are primarily produced in order to be sold in the market and thus generate income, and not to be consumed by the family itself. All of these cash crops need more water than the traditional crops, but with the tube well that's not a problem. Since it taps the groundwater it is independent of the often scarce and little predictable rainfalls. For exactly this reason, the family did not opt for building a *khadin*, a more traditional system which works by keeping the rainwater from running off the field. A *khadin* can considerably increase the moisture of the soil and thereby its yield. But for Sanga Singh's family, the old man explains, a tube well was much more desirable: a *khadin* does make better use of the rainwater but it simply cannot provide water where there is no rainfall.

The family has not only invested in the tube well: a tractor followed two years later, and some time ago



**The family and the well**

Sanga Singh's sons started to also use chemical fertilizers in addition to the organic ones they had been using. The family's income has grown considerably. However, much of the additional income is spent on the use of the tube well, especially on the electricity needed to power the tube well's pump which now makes up almost one third of the family's expenses. Still, together with the money they earn with their livestock and the pension that Sanga Singh receives for having served 15 years in the military, they now make a good living.

“Earlier we used to walk to Phalodi. Now people often go by jeep or by motorbike. Of course, then you have to pay for the fuel.” Sanga Singh knows well that if you would like to enjoy life nowadays, you need money. 'Cash' has become a need itself making many farmers, or at least those who can afford it,

invest in tube wells and start to produce cash crops. Even more so since demand and therefore prices for the traditional food crops have stagnated or decreased while cash crop prices are increasing, as Sanga Singh tells us. Subsistence farming and food crop production are thus more and more replaced by commercial agriculture. While for cash crops minimum prices are being ensured, no such policies exist for the majority of traditional crops.

Sanga Singh admits that life has become better over the years. But most of the things that people spend their money on he regards as rather unnecessary. Having spent most of his life with only two sets of clothing he cannot quite understand why people should need so many different sets nowadays. Or what they need a CD player for and why they have to buy cigarettes. Why you should pay for fuel when you can as well walk. When we come to look for Sanga Singh to interview him, his family sends us to the Durga temple that he is taking care of. It takes us several minutes of driving through the hot desert sand to find Sanga Singh resting there. He himself still walks the distance from his home to the Durga temple, several kilometres, every day, year after year. Sanga Singh only scoffs at the complaints of the younger. “They complain about diseases, about how their back hurts, about how this and that hurts while I am still fine and healthy.”

Surprisingly, Sanga Singh is nevertheless convinced that the decision to construct a tube well was right. “It's a good practice.” He doesn't have a problem with tube wells but with the way people use it depleting precious water resources to satisfy wants and needs that he does not deem essential. He points out to the possible dangers. “Look at Mathaniya. They grow chilli there. And the water in that area has been severely depleted. Most of the time the tube wells are dry there.” Groundwater level there has fallen below 1000 feet and the quality of the water has deteriorated. Besides the unsustainable use of the groundwater, Sanga Singh is also very critical about

the use of chemical fertilizers. He is sceptical whether the higher productivity that the new fertilizers have made possible can be sustained in the long run.

At the end of the interview, we take Sanga Singh's picture in front of his family's fields. His grandchildren happily join him. One of the last things he tells us is that such a thing as in Matanhiya will probably not happen here. "There are not that many tube wells in this area."

## Women and water

**Mehar Khatu (48), Samra Khatu (55)**  
**Jannat Khatu (48), Meera Devi (55)**  
**Sabira Khatu (40)**  
Badi Dhani, Baap Block,  
District Jodhpur

They smile and laugh a lot. “Yes, nowadays we are quite relaxed.” says a 48 years old woman Mehar Khatu. Especially when they think about how their lives used to be. The women we meet at Badi Dhani used to get up in the wee hours - 3 or 4 o'clock. After having ground the flour for later, they would leave their houses to fetch water. Walking some 5 kilometres up to the *naadi* and returning with the filled pitchers would take them up to three hours. Back home, after collecting firewood, the food for the family needed to be prepared. At 8 o'clock in the morning, they had already worked hard for four to five hours. In particularly severe drought years, the women would then leave to participate in the relief works in order to earn some additional money. Coming back from work, the inevitable chores of once more fetching water, taking care of the children, and cooking would still be waiting for them. They went to bed around 10 o'clock in the night knowing that the next day would be exactly the same.



Meera and Jannat tell their story

“There was no other option, especially with the men gone.” Their fathers, husbands and brothers would usually migrate during the droughts sending money back home when they could. Otherwise, it was left to

the women who stayed behind to take care of the everyday needs of their families. “It was very hard especially after having given birth we would have to get back to work after no



**Mehar and Samra talk about changing times** again, there were no other options.

more than 4 or 5 days of rest.” If the men could not send sufficient money for the survival of the family the women even worked at the salt mines. “We got problems with our skin from that work. And we got paid much less than the normal wage.” But

The women from Badi Dhani tell us that when they were younger, the lack of water was their worst problem. “We used very little water for ourselves, since we knew exactly how hard it was to get the water.” Wherever they could they would try to save water. “We waited with drinking water until we were very, very thirsty.” Samra Khatu (55) remembers very well. Chapatis sometimes were made from *juar*. Certainly, not for the taste, but because it didn't make them as thirsty as chapatis made from *bajra*, and it was less expensive. Water used for boiling *kair* they would use as drinking water even though it was sour.

One woman almost knocks over a cup of water, spilling some of its contents on the floor again she laughs: “Earlier I would have been beaten for something like that.” Likewise she would have been in trouble if she had been late serving the food or anything similar. But these things have changed, too. “We feel much more empowered today. In the old days, women were only there to work. We were like tools or machines. And men used to all the decisions.”

Today they proudly tell us that they, too, influence decisions and what is happening in their community. Things have been gradually changing, starting some 10 to 15 years ago. NGOs had some role in facilitating this change. They created Village

Development Committees and made sure that women could participate in them. In Self-Help Groups women had the chance to support each other. They gained confidence and some independence. So, how do the men feel about these changes, about women having a say in planning and decision-making. No smile this time, just a sincere answer: “Many men don't like it very much, but they accept the development since they don't have much of an alternative.”

The women are glad that their daughters lead a life that is less hard than theirs has been. They have more food, and the workload is not that huge. Water is available at much shorter distances since the government built a canal and a piped system some 15 years ago. And it is not only the fetching of the water that has become easier. Before we leave, Jannat Khatu (48) shows us how they used to grind the flour with a stone hand mill. It is quite easy to make the stone go around a few times with the mill being empty. But Jannat assures us that it is an altogether different story when it is actually filled with grains and you have to keep it going for up to half an hour to have enough flour for the whole family. “Today we let the flour be ground at a shop.”

Relieved from at least some burdens, women are also facing new possibilities. The little girls, granddaughters of the women we talked to, are not forced to work together with their mothers all day long. Instead, all of them go to school. Of course, their chances are still far from equal to those of their brothers. And it looks like it will probably take much more time until the majority of men will not only accept the new stand of women but come to understand and endorse it as something good. But the women of Badi Dhani are optimistic: “The first steps have been taken”, they conclude.

## Leaving home

**Shera Ram (76)**  
Mandaliya, Barmer District

“It took us about 10 days to get there.” Shera Ram (76) tells us about how he and his family left for Sindh in Pakistan, some 200 kilometres from their home village Mandaliya. While nowadays people will migrate by bus or train when there is a drought, Shera Ram tells us that when he was young he and his family travelled by feet. Like many others, they would go to Sindh which before independence used to be where most Rajasthani families migrated to when there were droughts. In that area, irrigated agriculture was possible because of the Bhakra Canal and so people usually could find work there. In the drought of 1939, one of the worst droughts the older people in this area can remember of, not only the adult men but whole

families left their villages. “The villages were all totally empty.”

Shera Ram went with his mother, two brothers and two sisters, his father having died at an early age. Having arrived in Sindh, they took up work as agricultural labourers. And they returned to their hometown only eight years later, forced to do so by partition of India and Pakistan in 1947.

For Shera Ram and his family, still after independence, migration stayed the last resort in times of severe drought. Of course, after partition,



Shera Ram has fought many droughts

Shera Ram and his family would no longer go to Sindh in Pakistan. So, in the drought of 1959, he and his two brothers went to Gujarat.

“That was much worse than going to Sindh.” Shera Ram explains. “I had to share one room with 25 people.” A room of about 20 x 10ft, underground, and filled not only with people but also with swarms of mosquitoes. The monthly rent still was Rs. 500, about Rs. 20 for each of its inhabitants. In Sindh, there had been enough free space and time for people to construct their own huts, making life there much more bearable. Back then, they had also been accompanied by the women of their families who would take care of the domestic chores, tells us Shera Ram.



**Drought-stricken Thar**

Later, in Gujarat, the men had to work and also take care of their own food, washing etc. “We came home very late from work, exhausted, and then we still had to cook for ourselves.”

Shera Ram tells us that during that time in Gujarat he could earn up to Rs. 5 a day as a carpenter. After having paid for accommodation, food, and other expenses, he managed to send about Rs. 100 back home to his family every month. Of course, this would only be true if he managed to get work every single day of the month. Often, that turned out to be difficult. During droughts, usually many people would migrate at the same time, all-looking for work. High unemployment prevailed. “Once, I couldn't find work for 10 days at a stretch,” Shera Ram remembers.

“Then the third time I migrated, in 1968, I went to Punjab.” In Punjab at least the living conditions were a little better. Similar to the times in Sindh, Shera Ram worked as an agricultural labourer and being in a more rural setting than in Gujarat they could build their own shelter there.



In 1974-75, relief work started in this area. But it could not bring sufficient relief to Shera Ram's family to make migration obstinate. "Wages were very low. And there was not enough work." When he first participated in the desilting of a *naadi*, within the relief work scheme, he earned only Rs. 1.75 a day. Even less than what he had earned in Sindh before independence. "But at least there were fixed working hours. In Sindh, we earned Rs. 2 a day but we had to work much longer."

So despite relief work, Shera Ram's sons continued to leave home and family whenever there was a severe drought. It was impossible to get the whole family through a bad drought just with relief work. Not only because of the low wages. Back then



In search of water

as well as today, there also would only be enough work for one member of each family and only for about 15 days at one time. "Then it was somebody else's turn, and you had to wait until you could work again."

When, or how often your turn would come depended

all too often on your relations, political influence or simply money. Shera Ram claims that nepotism and corruption have always been important in relief work, even until today. "And also, what can you do with the money when there is no food to buy?" Only recently, the government has started to implement the "food for work" programme. In past when relief work started, even when you were lucky enough to earn some money it could happen that you would not be able to buy enough food for your family.

"One of my sons just migrated in the drought of 2002." However, his other two sons stayed. One of them is a farmer and at the same time the village's *Sarpanch*. His duties as a *Sarpanch* would not allow him to leave the village for a longer time, and he also receives some money for holding this office. The second son helps him on the farm during the agricultural season, which is only if there is rain and the family can plant

their fields. “The rest of the time he is a shopkeeper.” Only 10 cows and 30 goats and sheep remain from originally more than 100, as Shera Ram's sons have gradually shifted towards non-agricultural work and income.

The third son works also on the family's farm in years with good rain. Otherwise, he still leaves Mandaliya to earn money elsewhere, as his father used to do. In 2002, he went to Vadodra in Gujarat to work in a weaving factory. “You just cannot earn enough with relief work. Everything has become more expensive. Look, when relief work began, I could buy 16 kg of *bajra* for one Rupee, and I was earning 2 Rupees a day. Today, the minimum wage is 73 Rupees, but that will only buy me about 7 kg of *bajra*!” tells us Shera Ram.

We would have also liked to talk to his son about his reasons and experiences, but could not do so. He only came back once in 2003 and then left again when there was no rain. Maybe now that there has been some rain he is going to come back at least for some time.

For the time being, his family still resides in their native village with the hope that good rains will bring back his son soon and they will be able to live as one whole family.

## Saving livestock...

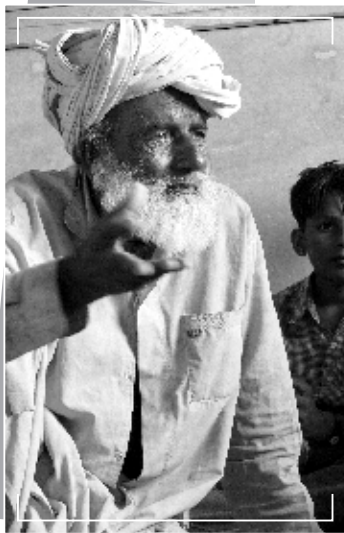
**Chande Khan (67)**  
Mandaliya, Barmer District

Chande Khan (67 years) and Shera Ram (76 years) are from the same village. Just like Shera Ram, Chande Khan had to migrate several times in his life. However, he was not looking for work. Rather, he was trying to save his family's livestock. "In 1968/69, I went to Vadodra in Gujarat. I took with me the 50 cows of my family and stayed for 25 months." One of his brothers accompanied him, another one migrated for work. The fourth of them remained behind to stay with the family.

"We lived at other people's farms, giving them milk in exchange." They could build a shelter for themselves, though Chande Khan tells us that often it would only be an open shed. "During winter we would freeze, and during the rainy

season it also was very uncomfortable."<sup>2</sup> But the cows would graze on the harvested fields, and he and his brother would usually also get some food from the landowners. The prize always was a share of the cows' milk and of the products made from it. How much they had to deliver would be fixed in a contract with the landholder. "Sometimes, we would give the milk of 10 cows to the farmer, another time all the milk."

"We knew that they were exploiting us most of the time, but what we should have done?" And it did not end with the landowners. Chande Khan would try to sell the remaining milk to hotels and to



Chande Khan speaks on his migration experiences

shops, so he could send some money to his family back home. “But they only gave us half of the normal price.” There were just too many other people in the same situation like him, and an abundant supply of milk.

They sent home the little money they earned. But where today we have cheques, banks and money wiring, sending money from one place to the other safely used to be much more difficult in those times. “We had to find somebody who was going to Mandaliya and give him the cash. Sometimes people would take a commission for taking the money.” A commission that varied with how well you knew somebody or whether it was a relative of yours. It also took very long for the money to get to the families. “But you could trust people,” Chande Khan remembers, and it shows in his face that he is proud about that. “They were more honest.” That a commission had to be paid was a clear and straightforward condition, but that the rest of the money would surely be delivered to the families at home was just as clear.

During the drought of 1968-69, Chande Khan and his brother stayed away for two years. Of the 50 cows that they had taken, only 27 returned. For the rest of the cows the long journey was too strenuous, or they died from lack of adequate water and fodder. “But still, if we had stayed here, we wouldn't have been able to pay for the fodder.” For Chande Khan and his family, it was the same procedure during every drought. At least once in five years he would take their livestock and leave, sometimes for just ten months, sometimes for longer.

“The last time was in 1987.” Again of 100 cows only 20 came back. Afterwards Chande Khan stayed at home. His age was but one reason, he tells us. “Relief work has improved a lot since then.” Both NGOs and the government now provide



Chande Khan's livestock

water in tankers during droughts. Also, in 1987, the nearest fodder depot used to be in Shiv, some 40 kilometres away. Too far for Chande Khan's family now, there are fodder depots much closer.

While we are talking, a big load of fodder from the government depot arrives. It is not only easily available, it's also subsidized. But when the men see the fodder that has been brought, they get upset. "Look at this. It is all wet. We cannot feed it to the animals like that!" The fodder is wet and mouldy. We are told that the people who are responsible for distributing and selling the fodder will wet it on purpose to increase its weight. "Sometimes it's also mixed with sand."

That less and less people migrate with their livestock is also the result of livestock migration having become more and more costly over the years. "Transport is expensive. You also have to pay for accommodation, food, and fodder. And still many animals die." In the past, people would sometimes donate water and food when Chande Khan and his animals passed. "People don't do that anymore." So Chande Khan's sons today will rather migrate for work, and the livestock survives on mouldy but subsidized fodder at home.

Others still do migrate with their livestock, though, as we learn in different interviews. And we even see it with our own eyes when just a little later we meet a truck loaded with sheep, goats, and even one donkey. They look like prisoners, being penned up in the small confines of the truck. We do not even want to imagine how long the animals might already have been in there, or when they have last seen fodder and water. We hope that they will come home soon.

## Fodder for everyone

**Ghemar Singh (67), Sanwar Singh (75)  
Raiwat Singh (66), Dhan Singh (69)  
Sagat Singh (55), Guman Singh (58)**  
Rasaltala, Shiv Block, Barmer district

“The village used to hold together. People used to help each other,” tells us Ghemar Singh who is 67 years old, and those who sit next to him nod in agreement. We were sitting in the big hut that is used by the community as a meeting place. While one man tries to silence the many twittering birds in the roof by chasing them with a long stick every now and then, the assembled men tell us eagerly how their community used to get through droughts together.

“The livestock was allowed to graze freely,” remarks Sanwar Singh (75) and he is not only referring to the community pastures which are very extinct today. He explains to us that after harvest, the animals were allowed to graze on the remaining stems of the harvested food crops that were left on the fields. “Fodder was not sold. The market was only for food.” It was common sense that livestock was important for everybody's existence as an insurance during droughts. So, not

only one's own livestock would be allowed to graze on one's land but also the animals of the other people from the village.

And when there simply was not enough fodder for everybody because of drought? “We migrated. Some men would stay and take care of the families.”

An exchange would take place:



A VOPA meeting in progress

One man would take with him the animals of another who in turn promised to take care of his family. Often several villages went together. “We picked each other up while we went along.” Then the government support came along. “The government started to provide free transport for people who wanted to migrate with their livestock.” As a result, villages and families started to go separately.

“In 1974-75 the government opened a fodder depot.” For Raiwat Singh (66 years), this event marked the beginning of the end. “People realized that they could sell fodder on the market.” Instead of leaving it for everybody's livestock, fodder started to be harvested just like food crop. “We were encouraged by the government to store our fodder for emergencies.” The government bought any surplus of fodder and stored it in the fodder depots.

Gradually people started to sell the fodder even among themselves when there was a drought. “The community system started breaking down.” The men in Rasaltala witnessed how people started to look increasingly after themselves, after their own livestock and their own families

## Who is right?

**Ghemar Singh (67), Sanwar Singh (75)  
Raiwat Singh (66), Dhan Singh (69)**  
Rasaltala, Barmer District

For Sanwar Singh (75), politics have divided people. “When the party system came with independence political struggles started.” People arranged themselves along the party lines. The men of Rasaltala tell us that even families broke apart over political struggles.

In their opinion, the former sense of community has also been undermined indirectly by policies that are often targeted at individuals and individual needs. Dhan Singh (69) uses relief work as an example: It is the individuals and families who receive money or food by taking part in relief work. And it's again often individuals who benefit from the results of relief work. “Relief work should be for the benefit of the whole community, but it usually is not like that.” In Dhan Singh's opinion, instead of serving the whole community and the needs of the poorest, often the richest benefit. Those with political influence or enough money are more likely to get a *khadin* or a *tanka* built in the course of relief work.



Older People of Thar in a get-together

Even where the planning is good and community-oriented, implementation of any infrastructure or other development measure today often is a question of party politics. Guman Singh (58) tells us that a government project was



started in 2002 on developing a pasture, but then the government changed.” Until today, the programme which altogether was supposed to take one year after it started is pending. “Nothing is happening.” On our way home, we will be bumping along on just another example of a politically disputed project. The “road” is nothing more than the traces of jeeps and bikes as well as foot prints in the desert sand, and it will probably stay like that for another while.

The men we talk to in Rasaltala are themselves supporters of different political parties. When they come to tell us about the various projects that the different parties support, they themselves get agitated and start to argue. It looks like the dividing lines run deep.

## Treasured waters

**Mola Baksh (82), Hamadin (78)  
Gafur Khan (85), Aam Deen (76)**  
Badi Dhani, Baap Block, Jodhpur

It is amazing how similar the story we hear in Badi Dhani is to what the men in Rasaltala have already told us. Here also, the men tell us, livestock used to graze freely, and during severe droughts people used to migrate with their animals. Like in Rasaltala, somebody would take care of your family while you would look after his animals. And the families who could afford to do so supported the poorer families if they were in need. “Nobody slept without having eaten. If we heard that a family was hungry we sent our children with food,” tells us Mola Baksh (82 years).

It used to be the same in the case of water. The community had two *naadis* and two wells. The wells were only used when the *naadis* had dried up. When even the wells could no longer provide water during very severe droughts, people had to go 30 kilometres to Nokhda to get water. “We went with a camel cart, and a big pitcher.” According to Hamadin (78 years), they would take the pitchers of families without camel carts with them. For no-cost, of course. “Today, everything depends on money. You have to spend more and more.” One of the men tells us, that in the previous year his one son had to give 1000 Rupees to his other son for every month he migrated his 50 animals.



Experience sharing with old age people



**A naadi in a village**

The men agree that people no longer care about each other and about the common resources as they used to. Just one more example is the desilting of the *naadi*. “In the past, we came together for two or three days to desilt the *naadi*. We collected food and cooked for everybody.” They claim that everybody took part and that caste and religion did not matter in the desilting of the *naadi*.

And water was used in a much more judicial, careful and conservative way. Not only was the groundwater of wells and *beris* as a rule reserved for when the *naadis* no longer provided water, water was also 'recycled', tells us Gafur Khan (85 years). “We collected the water that we used for bathing and used it once more for washing our cloth. After that, we gave it to our animals to drink.” Nothing was wasted.

Today, the village still use their *naadi*. But about 25 years ago, canal water was also provided to the village. “Since they built the canal, water wastage has increased a lot. It's a shame,” says Aam Deen (76 years). “I feel very sad when I see how water is being wasted.” His son does not understand what his father's problem is. “When I try to talk to him, he tells me that the times have changed.” He thinks that people simply do not appreciate water as much as they used to since it is so much more easily accessible now. “It is perceived as 'government water' so you can waste it. For my generation, it was our water, the water of the community. And we knew its true value.”



**A government well not functioning**

## Losing ground

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**Prabhu Ram (66), Ram Chandra (55),  
Punraj Singh (62), Durga Puri (58)**  
Malam Singh Ki Seed,  
Baap Block Jodhpur District,

It happened slowly, bit by bit, year by year. “My father started to sell land, to pay for the weddings or when he had too little money.” When Prabhu Ram (66) and his brothers took over the farm from his father, he found himself in the same situation. The land kept shrinking with every drought year. Of the 800 *bighas*, in 5 brothers that he inherited from his father, only about 400 *bighas* is left today. “The last time, I sold the land in 1987. It was a very severe drought, for two years in a row, and I had to give away 110 *bighas* of land at once to pay the bills.” Since then, the land has been further divided among his sons. They too keep selling small parts of it, like the 20 *bighas* during the drought of 2002.

The other men sitting next to Prabhu Ram all have experienced similar stories. The reasons for the sale of their family's lands keep repeating themselves. When there was no good harvest in the previous year, they would not have sufficient seeds nor would they have sufficient money to buy seeds and fertilizers and to hire a tractor to plough the land. They tell us that expenses for food and water have risen. “And our daughters also do not stop growing just because there is a drought,” remarks one of the men. So, even during continuous drought years, weddings have to take place.

“In the past, it was easier to get labour work.

And well-off families would also give some support, like food or water, to the poorer families,” remembers Ram Chandra (55). But over the years, all agree, expenses have risen and as they did so the mutual support of the villagers has become less and less.

So the men of Malam Singh Ki Seed would sell some of their land or go to the moneylender. Lately, some of them have leased land to people who pay them good money for contract farming. “They offer good money.” Afraid of the next drought, people take the chance. But they do not think that it will do them any good in the long run. “When our land is gone, what shall we live from?”

Punraj Singh's (62) family is already down to 100 *bigha*, there is not too much land left that they could turn into money if the monsoon fails again and they cannot bring in a good harvest. They used to have 1000 *bigha* of land, but almost all of his land has gone so that Punraj Singh could cover the family's expenses during drought times. “We spend about Rs. 7,000 every year just on water.” Officially, the village has a government supply, but since this is not properly working most of the time, Punraj Singh's family depends on getting water by a tanker from Bap village, some 25 km away from his village. He is afraid of what the future might bring. “There are families who had to buy water and they could not pay. Then the owner of the water tanker demanded their land.”

Or the moneylender would take the land when the debts became too high to be paid back. That is what happened to Durga Puri (58), who also takes part in the discussion in the community hall. His story is one of sorrow and misery, and it is probably his fate that everybody is afraid of sharing some day. Durga Puri used to own 100 *bigha* of land. To get through his family of 6 daughters and three sons Durga Puri went to the village moneylender.

His debts kept growing while he kept hoping for good harvests to pay back the money. But instead of a good harvest, there was

the drought of 1987. "It was a very severe drought. There was no harvest, no drinking water." So he had to take up another, even larger loan. "It didn't get much better afterwards and I could not pay back my debts. So I had to give the moneylender some of my land."

We could see the desperation in Durga Puri's eyes as he tells about how the moneylender took over the land of the family, bit by bit. And then the worst possible happened. Durga Puri's eldest son died. It is still difficult for him to talk to us about the accident that robbed him of his eldest and only adult son. And as if the death of his son had not been enough, the family's economic situation got worse every day. Without the support of his son, Durga Puri could hardly feed the rest of the family. "And the money lender refused to give me any more money," he tells us. Only under one condition the money lender was willing to help out the family once more. So Durga Puri surrendered the little that was left of his land.

Together with his land, he surrendered the hope of ever getting back onto his own feet again. Today, both he and his wife do labour work. And some people from the village do support them. He is not getting much of government help. Durga Puri's family is recognised as Below Poverty Line (BPL), but he is not getting lot of benefits. And when he applied for the Indira Gandhi Housing Scheme, the *panchayat* insisted on a contribution by himself of Rs. 5000, which he can not raise.

Durga Puri is desperate and depressed. It's a miserable life and he does not see any way out. The moneylender also will not give him any more money. He knows that Durga Puri probably would not be able to pay it back. And there is no land left that he could take away from him.

## Where are you going, India?

**Bal Kishan Thanvi (83)**  
*Phalodi*

When we met Bal Kishan Thanvi (83) in his family's house in Phalodi, the first thing that caught our eye was the painting of M. K. Gandhi hanging on the wall and the many newspapers and files in the shelves of the little room. Bal Kishan Thanvi is a former freedom fighter and today at the age of 83, he still is an activist, poet, and a newspaper editor. Several times, he has been arrested by the police because he demonstrated on the streets for his beliefs. When Bal Kishan Thanvi was young, he fought for independence, and ever since then he has been standing up against injustice.

“While we were fighting for independence, we were full of hopes. We thought everything would become better once India became independent.”

Bal Kishan Thanvi describes what kind of India he and his fellows had in mind.

“We expected that there would be no corruption. That there would be quick and efficient relief.” He says that they were actually expecting poverty to disappear together with political and economic dependency.

“But we find ourselves in a difficult situation today.” Bal Kishan Thanvi is quite clear about the present situation. “Often policies are very good in the written form.” But often times the policies are not turned into actions. Many policies get distorted in the process of implementation. Or the intended results do not materialize but undesired consequences that have not been



**Bal Kishan Thanvi is  
a man of steel**

thought of do. “Look at the Indira Ghandi Canal. It was built to overcome the problems of drought, but the area is still drought-stricken.” Bal Kishan Thanvi also thinks that the original idea behind the Green Revolution was quite good and it could have served a high cause. “They wanted to make India self-dependent. We were importing food from America, like wheat and *juar*.” He would have liked to have seen hunger being eradicated by the Green Revolution.

“Today, India even exports grains. Food gets stored. But people still suffer from hunger, they still starve!” Apparently, something has gone wrong. All the while, the groundwater is being depleted more and more for the sake of water-intensive agriculture and exports. “Until today we do not have a groundwater policy or laws regulating its extraction. Everybody who owns land and wants to do so can extract as much water as he wants to.” Bal Kishan Thanvi is sad that the politics appears to be unable to solve the most urgent problems of the country. Necessary change and innovation do not take place. “How can you still concentrate on agriculture in such a water-scarce area, when the groundwater tables are declining ever more?”



At 83. Mr. Thanvi is strong and active.

To make his point, Bal Kishan Thanvi then tells us a popular story about the time when a King in this area organized relief work. He was the one who introduced relief work in this particular area during the drought of 1939. “The problem was that his middlemen didn't give the money and the food to the workers as they were supposed to do.” Some people tried to complain to the king and organized a march from Phalodi to Jodhpur. Mr. Thanvi also took part in the march and the group expressed their views to the King who understood it and the situation changed.

“We need to strengthen ourselves further and have a long-term



## Conclusion

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Drought is chronic phenomenon in the Thar Desert. Its impacts on the livelihoods of people living in the region and on the overall socio-economic status are long lasting. Every aspect of life including health care, education of children and empowerment of weaker sections of the community, is directly or indirectly linked with the drought in the region. Hence, drought mitigation will always be a point of central focus in the overall developmental planning of the region.

Older People living in the region have demonstrated their resilience, wisdom and expertise in dealing with drought over last several centuries. In spite of being extremely vulnerable to the adverse impacts of drought, older people, often, have led the relief and mitigation measures. As the number of Older People keeps growing in the region like in other parts of the world, the community of Older People will play a more prominent role in-years-to-come. Development planners, policy makers need to tap those special abilities of the older people and involve them in the processes of planning, implementation and monitoring of drought relief and mitigation programmes.

Further, Older People also have special needs according to their age and physical abilities. These needs, especially in terms of healthcare, nutrition and shelter, need to be identified and special focus should be laid on meeting these needs. Older People are a precious resource for any community in the world and they should given priority.

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## हिन्दी में

- करूँ मैं सुमिरन
- साँझ की लालिमा
- परम्परागत पेयजल स्रोत
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- पशु स्वास्थ्य
- बेहतर वृद्ध स्वास्थ्य
- संवेद्य स्वर

Sprawling across the North Western plains of India, lies the world's most densely populated arid zone, the Thar Desert. A fierce land, characterized by soaring temperatures, erratic rainfall, sparse vegetation cover and frequent drought, the valient people of the Thar inhabit the plains, many would render uninhabitable. Despite thousands of years of survival, its delicate eco-system is under constant threat of collapse. Depleting natural resources, recurring droughts, and generation of poverty have contributed to a developmental crisis. Water insecurity, malnutrition, illiteracy, unemployment, and preventable diseases are endemic. It is among this contrast of shimmering sarees and barren dunes, that the story of GRAVIS is set.



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