

CAMEL FAIRS IN INDIA: A PHOTO ESSAY

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Western India has four traditional camel trading markets that operate over a period of several weeks during the winter. The biggest and most notable one is at Pushkar in Rajasthan. Pushkar [Fig. 1] is located on the edge of the Thar Desert (also known as the Great Indian Desert), which serves as a natural geographic barrier between India and Pakistan. Being situated on the edge of a desert and not far from the important north-south transportation artery from the Arabian Sea to Central Asia, Pushkar constitutes an obvious place to buy and sell camels during the days of the fair.

Some of the older lodgings were formerly caravanserais and retain entrances with doors tall enough to allow fully loaded camels to enter. When camels were not expected, the large doors could be kept closed and smaller doors opened to greet guests on foot. Cars are not welcome during the days of the fair and people ride on camel-

drawn wagons with wheels that will get them through the sand. By some estimates, the annual Pushkar camel fair attracts approximately 200,000 visitors. And while camels certainly steal the show at Pushkar, they are not the only reason so many people flock to the fair every year. Adorned with

many temples and *ghats* (steps for pilgrims to use for bathing along holy rivers and lakes), Pushkar is a pilgrimage site for both Hindus and Sikhs. As a sacred Hindu city, the consumption of alcohol, meat, fowl, and eggs is prohibited in Pushkar and such items are not found or served at the camel fair.

Over the years, the gathering of pilgrims, tribespeople, and camels at Pushkar on

the eve of the full moon (Purnima) of the winter month of Kartik (i.e., November or December) has fostered the addition of other markets and amusements. These include farm implements and tools, crafts, an array of cuisines, livestock and agricul-

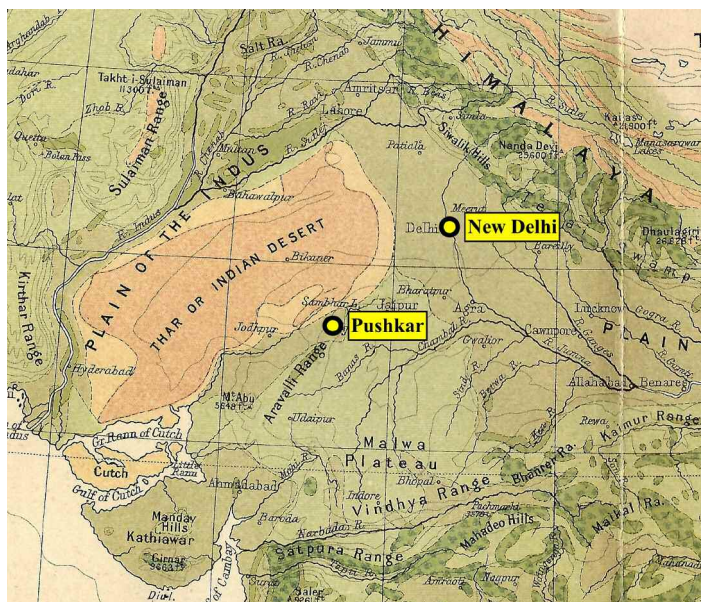


Fig. 1. Map of northwestern India showing Pushkar on the edge of the Thar Desert.

Fig. 2. Camel herd at Bateshwar.



tural markets, song and dance competitions, and various carnival attractions such as Ferris wheels, rides, acrobats, snake charmers, magicians, contests (e.g., tug-of-war, longest moustache, etc.), hot air balloon rides, and cotton candy. As a result, the Pushkar camel fair is a study in the sheer diversity of the cultures and livelihoods of South Asia, which are given vivid expression in the burst of colors, costumes, and aromas any visitor is likely to encounter. Perhaps most memorably, the fair is brought to an end with an *aarti* fire ceremony at the lake, accompanied by a final bathing ritual and a morning parade of performers, camel riders, decorated camels, and gypsy dancers.

I first visited the Pushkar camel fair in 1974 while my family and I lived in New Delhi. With all the camels and tribespeople, it was like nothing I had seen before and nothing I could have imagined. It was so fascinating that I visited again the following year. Thirty seven years later, I returned to the site that had once so entranced me. Since 2012, I have attended the Pushkar camel fair every year and may continue doing so as long as I am able.

Both India and the fair have changed considerably in the 45 years since I first lived in New Delhi. Back in 1974, travel to Pushkar from the capital was by train or bus over bad roads. Taking the train meant

an overnight journey of 14 hours, with requisite transfers en route. Now one can hire a car to drive to Pushkar straight from the Delhi airport in just six and a half hours. Another change in recent years is the large number of Israeli tourists who come to the fair—so many, in fact, that there are Hebrew signs in the marketplace and several

restaurants specializing in vegan and vegetarian Israeli food.

Other camel markets in Rajasthan and the neighboring state of Uttar Pradesh also convene in the days before Kartik Purnima. One is in Koyalat Village near Bikaner, a second is at Bateshwar near Agra, and a third (Chandrabhaga Fair) is at Jhalrapatan (just south of Kota, Rajasthan). All four of these camel fairs feature similar activities at the same time, but for fewer days. They are located near sacred rivers or lakes, and also include various markets, temporary shops, and carnival attractions synchronized with the arrival of pilgrims.

By far the largest and most well attended camel fair, however, is at Pushkar. The accompanying images are a small selection



Fig. 3. Arriving at the Pushkar camel fair.



Fig. 4. A camel taxi caravan to the Pushkar camel fair.

of the many hundreds of photographs I have taken at camel fairs in India over the years, provided in hopes of introducing this fascinating spectacle to a wider audience.

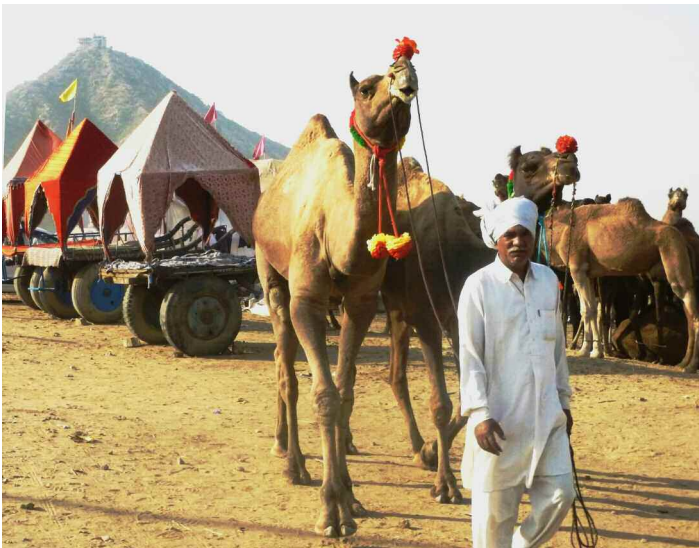


Fig. 5. The camel taxi stand at Pushkar.



Fig. 6. Camel herders camp at Bateshwar.



Fig. 7. Shaved decorations on a camel at Bateshwar.



Fig. 8. Camel traffic jam at a Pushkar crossroads.



Fig. 9. Camel market at Bateshwar.



Fig. 10. Dancing Kalbelia gypsy girls, who live on the outskirts of Pushkar.

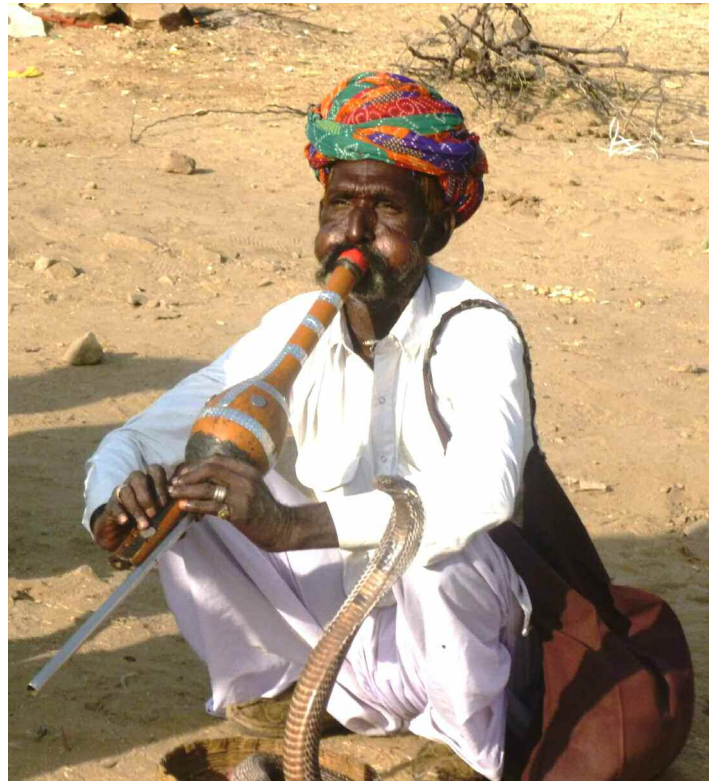


Fig. 11. Kalbelia snake charmer at the Pushkar fair.



Fig. 12. Poor women receiving food at a Pushkar temple.



Fig. 13. Children, dressed up as mythological figures, in search of offerings.

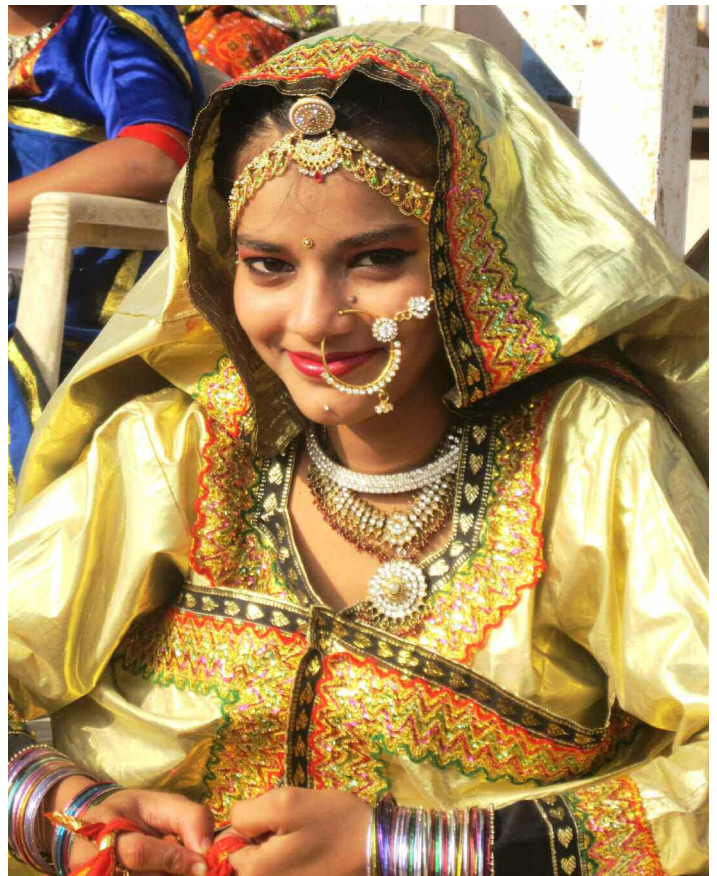


Fig. 14. Young female spectator at the Pushkar camel fair.



Fig. 15. Rajasthani camel herder at Pushkar.



Fig. 16. Rajasthani parade at the Pushkar camel fair.



Fig. 17. Rajasthani men at the Pushkar camel fair.



Fig. 18. Rajasthani camel corps.



Fig. 19. Rajasthani camel herders at Pushkar.



Fig. 20. Meeting of Rajasthani tribesmen at Pushkar.



Fig. 21. Pilgrims at a Shiva temple in Bateshwar.



Fig. 22. Hindu pilgrims at Pushkar Lake.



Fig. 23. Pilgrims praying at Pushkar Lake during full moon.



Fig. 24. Camel herders encamped at Bateshwar.



Fig. 25. The author in front of a decorated camel taxi at Pushkar.