



RAJASTHAN

EXPLORING PAINTED SHEKHAWATI

ILAY COOPER



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## LOCKETT ENTERS CHURU AND WE COME HOME

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Halfway to Churu, a roadside dune is topped by a shrine to Hanuman, a recent concrete structure lost in a flurry of scarlet pennants. It blazed startlingly in the evening sun. The road, patched and poor, turned to cross and recross the railway line as it passed the highest, most impressive dunes in the region. They are defaced now, dug and built over. Concrete advances in all directions from the suburbs. Sandstorms are not as frequent as they were. Often it was a north wind in summer that brought a rolling purple cloud bearing down on the town, bringing a yellow darkness, then dissolving it in a shower of rain.

Churu is home to both of us, Rabu's only home and my Indian one, a shadow of the smaller place where I grew up. For Lockett and Boileau it was just another desert town, larger than most, but their first in Bikaner, a new country. They approached along a different route, leading straight towards the walled town, following a road that remains in its original condition, a sandy track rising over a ridge to look down on the rear of the fort. Now, the suburbs have advanced a long way to meet them. Our road quits theirs a couple of kilometres before the town, heading more to the south, towards the twentieth-century railway station sector.

Whisper of steam locomotives would have reached them, but neither would have seen one: Lockett never would. Steam engines were already

making inroads into India but locomotives were still far away. The first steam-powered vessel was launched onto the Ganges in 1819 and within a decade a paddle steamer travelled upriver to Allahabad, to be greeted by a great crowd. Soon regular services carried goods and passengers up and down the river. Their reign was short, but it was steam again—the railway—that supplanted them. The new technology brought a profound and permanent revolution to marine travel. In 1824 a large sum was offered to the first company to run a steamship between London and Calcutta. Lord Byron died that same year, having introduced the English to a Romantic vision of the Orient. Their approach to India and her people altered radically over four centuries. Coming in the 1600s as merchants, they pleaded with the Great Mughals for entry, amazed at the world that greeted them. They stayed, growing powerful through the Age of Reason as the Mughals shrank. The close of the eighteenth century and the early nineteenth was a period of discovery, when Company officers, in their spare time, deciphered scripts and began to uncover great tracts of lost history and literature. This is where the Shekhawati Expedition came in. There is no sense of racial superiority in the writing of either man, only of social class. Some were equal, some inferior.

In Lockett's day, Churu's southern railway sector was still open desert. Now it has given way

Facing page:  
A sandstorm  
advances on  
Churu's Gudri  
bazaar. Typical  
of the summer,  
it usually ends  
in a heavy  
shower.

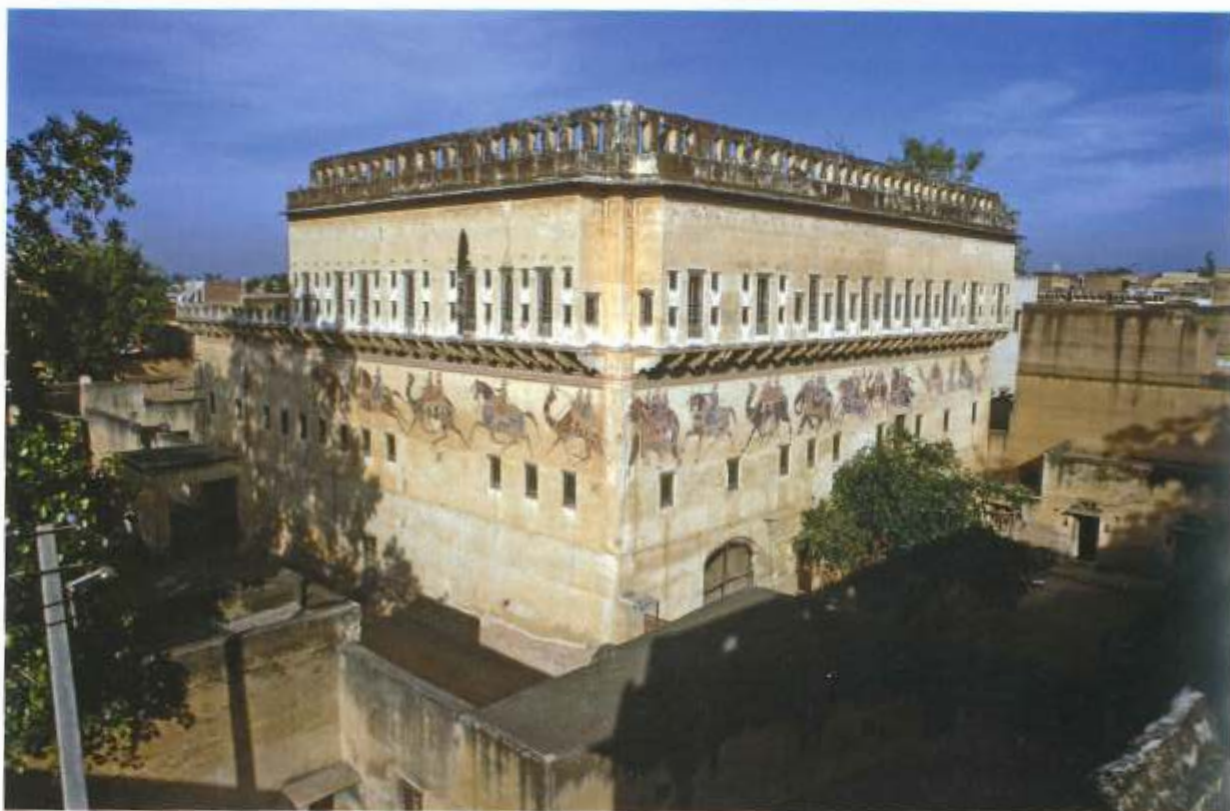
Top: Kanhaiyalal Bagla's haveli (c. 1890s) has a beautiful painted frieze of scenes from folk tales (Churu).

Bottom: A detail of Kanhaiyalal Bagla haveli, Dhola and Maru (left) escape the bandit Umra-Sumra, a scene from Rajasthan's favourite folk tale.

Finally, as we passed a tea stall, he suggested tea there. I succumbed: we have been friends ever since! That friendship influenced my decision to settle in Churu and for many years Bharat Boot House was my local postal address.

After that first tea, he showed me the best painted buildings. They didn't interest him at all. As a good *bania*, his mind was dedicated almost exclusively to money, but they were built by his community and he knew where they were. Best was Kanhaiyalal Bagla's haveli, built at the close of the nineteenth century and bearing the finest frieze in the whole region. It comprised a procession of life-sized people on elephants, camels and horses.

Some of the pictures were taken from folk tales. There was a lesson in all those stories: all the couples that loved across caste boundaries were doomed, like the picture labelled '*Sassi Punu*', showing a pair of ill-fated lovers riding side by side towards disaster. Behind them are Dhola and Maru, stars of Rajasthan's most famous love story. Perched together on their camel, they are pursued by Umra-Sumra, a wicked dacoit, along with one of his allies, both on horseback. As they close in, firing muskets, Maru turns to let fly a stream of arrows. Being caste-wise compatible, married as infants but separated by fate, their story ends happily ever after in a slightly unorthodox





A hatted European mercenary, musket on shoulder, approaches a Shiva temple along with local troops. Aath Kambh chhatri, Churu (1776).

threesome, Dhola having acquired another wife in between times.

I found an old, battered *chhatri*, too, built in 1776 at a cost of 2,201 rupees (always that extra digit) for a Rajput relation to Churu's *thakur*. It is known as Aath Kambh chhatri, the 'Eight Pillar chhatri', which is odd since almost all *chhatris* have eight pillars. Perhaps the memorials to Churu's ruling *thakurs*, which stood nearby, had more. Only red sandstone fragments remain. This one was built on a basement containing rooms entered through open archways. These were easily overlooked since two centuries of summer winds dropping sand and dust have raised the ground level until only the points of their arches are visible. In any one town, buildings were buried at a fairly constant rate helping to date them. An ancient haveli doorway, dated 1790, was almost as deeply sunk as that *chhatri*.

A talented artist had painted the domed ceiling although most of the pigment was reduced to black. Was he the man named in the inscription as Sukha Kumhar, who had come from Khandela on the far side of the Aravalli ridge? The paintings showed

the dead man himself and various incarnations of Vishnu, including Krishna with his milkmaids in a dancing ring. Long afterwards, I noticed a small figure in a hat and carrying a musket approaching a Shiva temple. Once identified, he stood out startlingly as one of the European mercenary infantrymen who played such a major role in late eighteenth-century Indian warfare.

Nandu's house, with its two small courtyards, stood beside the fort. Often I ate there, approaching through a little wicket in the fort's north wall which gave into his alley. The fort, rebuilt by the raja of Bikaner to house his garrison, is plain. As home to the second noble of Bikaner state, it must have held a palace, but he rebelled. In his rage, after he retook the town the raja pulled down much of the building. Today it holds a police station, a clinic and a temple.

That first visit to Churu was in November when the bazaar was preparing for Diwali, festival of lights. It was vital to *baniyas* as the festival of



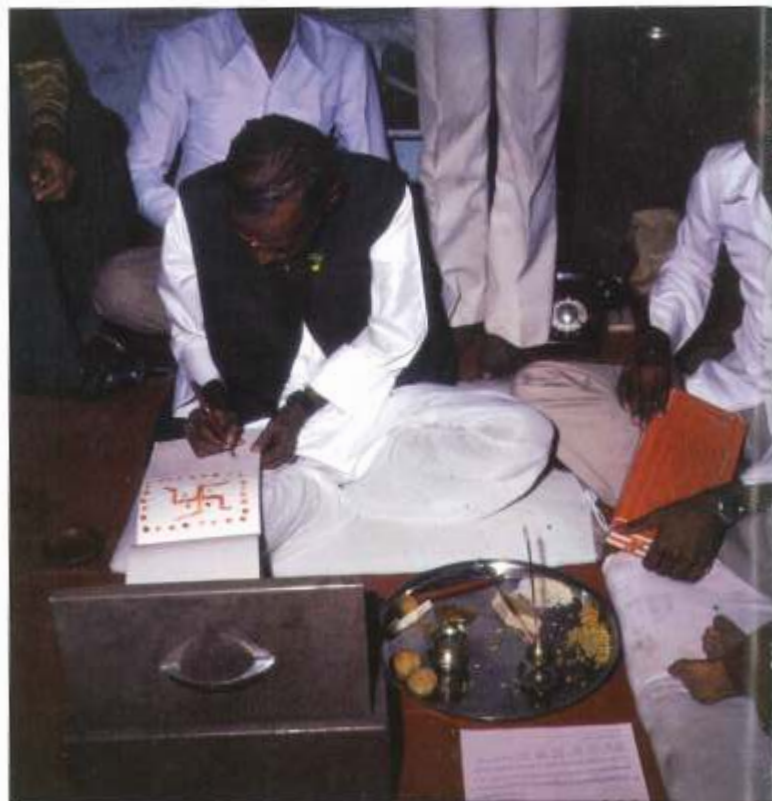
at Diwali,  
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pens his  
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or a new  
cial year.

Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, and start of a new financial year. In preparation, houses are cleaned and redecorated, their murals often succumbing to pink or turquoise limewash. At Bharat Boot House, Nandu, like every other shopkeeper, supervised a thorough purge ready for the Diwali sale of old stock. Watched over by the goddess most Hindus indulged in gambling, forgetting that for every winner there must be a loser. Nandu's father, like all other shopkeepers, opened his new account books each covered with stitched scarlet cotton cloth.

The climax of Diwali coincides with the new moon. This is said to be the darkest day of the year. One of the womenfolk would paint a stylised figure of Lakshmi low on the wall of a room and the whole family came to pray to her. They rotated a brass tray bearing candles, food and money in front of her, then applied a piece of sweet to her mouth. Afterwards, there was a feast and tiny terracotta oil lamps or candles would be set out along terraces, parapets around the roofs and outside doors to guide Lakshmi and her wealth to the house. Those lamps, *diyas*, gave the festival its name.

Nandu brought me in on all the family celebrations. It took a long time to understand why my food was served in the side courtyard on plates which he himself washed. The rest of the family ate in the main court off stainless steel thalis, washed by the womenfolk. It was caste. I might be a guest but I was also a polluting *mlechha*, a meat-eating infidel. Enamel dishes were kept in the side court just for feeding the likes of me. Nandu's mother was orthodox: she would not put her family's soul at risk.

I rose from ignominy, however. One day she had a bandage around her upper arm. When asked, she told me that she was prone to occasional attacks of a nasty rash and it was troubling her particularly badly. I had noticed it but, since she was very dark, hadn't recognised it to be the same eczema I suffered. Next day, I gave her a film container of betnovate ointment. The



eczema cleared rapidly ... and my food came in on a thali!

Nandu was never content with the shoe shop. He had aspirations, was always looking for some other prospect. In the late 1970s a government carpet-training centre in Churu was on the verge of closure. A friend suggested the idea of carpet making and they talked of it together, but it was Nandu who actually exploited the situation. As the centre closed he bought a couple of looms and employed the ustad and some of the half-trained boys. The looms were set up in the side courtyard, which had a separate entrance, so that the low-caste boys could come to work without disturbing the central, women's, courtyard.

At first he was manufacturing six foot by four foot carpets for an exporter who fed the German market. It was contract work: the exporter supplied dyed wool and design 'maps', then returned to collect the finished item. Payment was by area, but the company was quick to impose penalties for any real or perceived flaw. But the idea seemed to be working. More looms were set up in another neighbouring courtyard.



His enterprise started in 1979 and I wrote an article on it for the Bombay design magazine, *Inside-Outside*, the following year. Already I felt that his commitment seemed likely to pay off. The ustad had to go—his interest in the boys excelled that in the carpets. We tried looking for another. I remember a trip out to a nearby town to meet a man who had spent a long time in Bikaner jail for murder. Bikaner jail was famous for carpet manufacture and he had taken part in the work but, once free, he wasn't keen to get back into the industry. Nandu's only solution was to become hands on and learn all aspects of the manufacturing process. Then he could supervise his own workers and keep an eye on quality. He began to look around for other opportunities to expand.

I made other friends. There was a group of Muslim youths who would meet of an evening at Ansari's shop in the main bazaar. Ansari was a sign painter, crippled by polio, who diverted into acrylic portraits or any other pictures that struck his fancy. He was keen on chess and had several sets, so in the evening we used to sit in the shop beside the dark, closed bazaar, playing.



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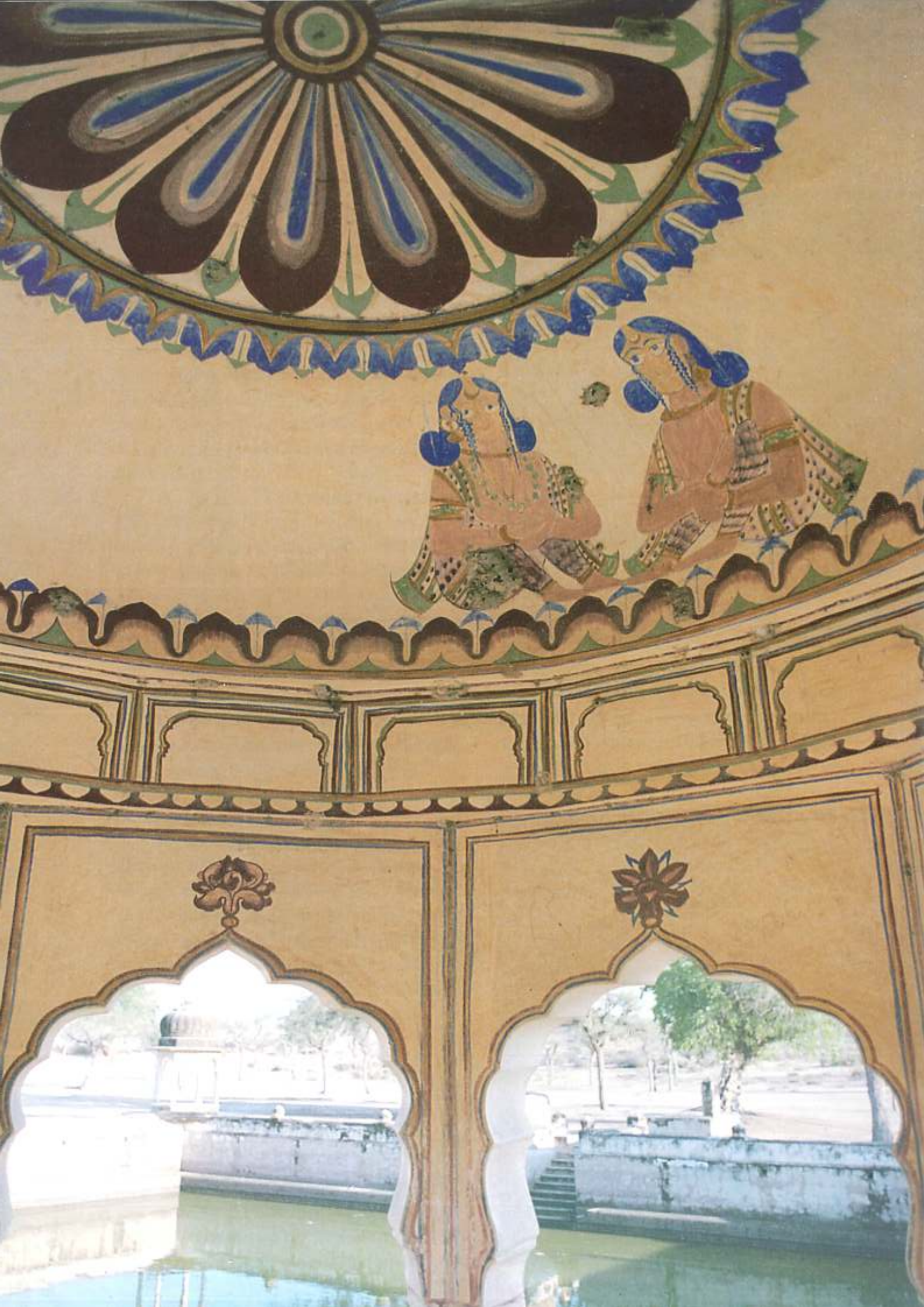
I met Rabu's family one monsoon when the *joharas* were full of fresh rainwater. Having cycled to Bissau, I was happily staring at a painted wall when Arvind came up and asked what was interesting. He got a short lecture on Shekhawati's murals. Just out of college and teaching at a small school in the town, he was taking the kids for a walk. In conversation I mentioned that, being from the seaside, I missed swimming. He promised to call in on his next visit to Churu and show me where to swim.

A week later he appeared at the hotel. We went together to his house and, along with his younger brothers, Rabu and Munji, we swam at Pithana johara nearby. It was a rainwater reservoir about thirty metres square, its stepped masonry floor sinking well out of my depth. For a couple of weeks after that, I cycled to their place most days for a swim. Rabu and I got on well from the start, putting it down to our position in the family hierarchy, both being delinquent second sons.

Then suddenly Pithana johara was closed to us. Arriving one evening, I found the place crowded. A teenage boy, one of Nandu's neighbours, had dived in to show off to his mates, forgetting that he didn't know how to swim. They were still looking for him. I was at Nandu's house when the jeep arrived carrying his body, draped in a white sheet. As they took him into the courtyard to the wailing of the women one long, brown foot emerged from the cloth. It was too late in the day for his cremation, which must take place before sunset. The menfolk laid him in the courtyard and carried him out to the burning ground next morning. The caretaker of the *johara* put it about that there was a *bhoot* dwelling in the water, an evil ghost with a need for human souls to feed on. So he banned swimming there for our own good. We shifted to isolated Kalera johara, covering the three km of rough track both of us on my bicycle, but the refreshing swim there was rather spoiled by the sweaty journey back.

In the small courtyard, Nandu and his wife sit on a loom from which one of his first carpets has been cut.







My time was spent alone but not lonely. Most days some curious fellow would call in to look me over and there were always the hotel boys. They soon discovered that, unlike many of the guests, I had no erotic interest in them and my room usually held fruit, always beedies and magazines with interesting pictures. Nice kids, all of them, they'd sit on my bed eating, smoking and leafing through pictures, whispering to each other whilst I typed away at the marble-topped table Panditji had provided.

I still see some of those kids. Only last winter, while walking through Jaipur, a smart car pulled up beside me, the tall driver got out and tried to touch my feet, the normal greeting by young to old. It was the little boy they called 'Dans'—mosquito—now a chauffeur. Most have ended up with good jobs. One works in a dyeing business in Delhi. Another, a dark boy whom I always think of by his nickname, 'Blackie', and have to check myself now when greeting him, works in a government office. Sushil migrated with his brother to the hills of distant Meghalaya. Ravi planned to go to the Gulf. Did he ever get there? Meanwhile, 'Mussibat' (Calamity, a name I gave him) still goes round like a bright, battered tomcat.

Room three on the upper floor, if basic, was a corner room and the best in the hotel. Narrow double doors gave into a two-and-a-quarter metre cube (I measured it one day while writing a letter home) of my own space. The walls were cream-washed, an electric light bulb projecting from a wooden housing above my table. Sometimes the power was so weak that the filament was no more than a red worm suspended in the darkness. The floor was produced by massaging ochre into wet cement, which created a maroon burnished surface, a technique similar to Jaipur fresco. It was divided into equal squares by indented lines giving the impression of tiles. A nine-inch border was left grey. The ceiling was of sandstone planks gently patterned with a relief of fossil ripple marks. That stone, a rich resource in a state poor in timber,

breaks easily along the bed to yield great slabs some two inches thick and up to thirteen feet long from which those planks are cut. On sleepless nights, I stared up at that whitewashed pattern of ripples until I knew it by heart. From its centre hung the ceiling fan.

The furniture was confined to that table, a chair and a charpoy, the standard wooden, string-meshed bed-frame. It was well lit, cool and draughty in summer, with barred, wooden-shuttered windows on two sides. Another door opened onto a tiny balcony on the façade which was overshadowed by a peepul, the tree under which Buddha attained Enlightenment. A breeze in the glossy, heart-shaped leaves sounded like rain. Birds inhabited it; there were always mynahs, often barbets, bright green with a dash of scarlet. In the evening, peacocks flew up, honking, to roost in the branches. In those early days to the south, beyond the railway line, there were dunes. As summer advanced towards the rains they would plough some of them and, in a good year, it was surprising how generously that sand would yield.

With the railway station so close, beneath the peepul and my balcony were laid out the benches and tables of an all-night tea-house which served travellers. The owner had a 'two-in-one', a large ghetto blaster bought from some Gulf-returned youth. I got to learn, and love, most of the Hindi film songs as they rose and fell in popularity. Best were the older, more staid ones, sad often, like '*Ansu barhee hey*' (Tears increase) or '*Do dil*' (Two hearts) from *Heer-Ranjha*, that famous Romeo and Juliet love story. There were evocative songs, too, from films like *Pakeezah* and *Shor* which had coincided with my cycle trip across north India. Deaf in one ear since childhood, the noise at night never became too intrusive.

I like a structure to life. During my first years the day started with an odd young man, Saxena, delivering papers to each room. His mind knocked slightly out of alignment, he spoke in a rapid staccato between deep breaths, exhibiting an unusual knowledge of English. He was not

Facing page:  
Pithana johara,  
a rainwater  
reservoir  
in Churu. It  
served as our  
swimming pool  
until a boy was  
drowned there.



Rajsthani. His father had moved here from Uttar Pradesh. Saxena, they said, had been a brilliant student at college but, working his head too hard, had tripped over the precipice from sanity. He cheated honestly invariably remembering that, in all his jingling pockets, he had no change or making it clear he had no intention of returning the full sum or, if he so chose, anything at all. Rarely, from principle, I pressed the point. He was far too inept to be a rogue and his need was greater than mine. Then one day he just disappeared. There was no explanation; I just started walking up the road to Mr Parekh's shop for my paper, *Indian Express* or *Times of India*—not *Hindustan Times*. Then I would come back to read it in bed over tea.

Some years later, returning to Churu by train, I heard Saxena's unmistakable voice working through the carriage, passenger by passenger, with pious imprecations. It was certainly him, but when he appeared the image was transformed. He caught my eye. With a broad grin, he pushed through the people sitting on the floor, grabbed my hand, shook it hard and broke out into English. The hand that gripped mine so firmly was heavily bandaged. I looked him up and down. He was bearded and unkempt, his tattered middle-class shirt and pants cast aside in favour of the faded saffron of a pious mendicant. His were not robes, just rough lengths of cloth retaining sufficient pigment to indicate his calling. With holy *rudraksha* beads around his neck and a cream-coloured sandal paste stripe painted across his forehead he cut a far more imposing figure than before. Those who might not give from piety could be persuaded by sympathy, fired by the multitude of bandages. Palms and feet were all neatly, if grubbily, covered, a patch of iodine marking the centre of each swathe. Did he know of the stigmata? The hearty handshake suggested there was little amiss with the flesh beneath.

'How goes it, Saxena sahib?' I asked flippantly. He looked fleetingly angry.

'There is no Saxena now. I am Babaji. Can't you see? It is good for you to help me!'

So I slipped him a small note and he smiled as though some complicity stood between us. After that I saw him from time to time, more often heard him at night beneath my window in that tea place, where the clientele amused themselves by baiting him. His voice would rise until, beside himself, he stuttered incoherently with rage. He was never violent. He cursed them in the name of every god for their disrespect to a man of the cloth. Then he would shuffle off, still talking. Most of his audience knew him of old. There was no conversation with him. He said what he wanted to say despite anything you might interject, then, raising your donation to his forehead in thanks, left. There are lots like him across India. They have their value.

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Rabu and I drove past the old Post Office into Gudri bazaar, Bharat Boot House on its right side. The shop remains, passed to other hands, often locked or turned to other work. The façades on that side have a battered look, scarred during Indira Gandhi's Emergency, imposed ostensibly to 'Save the Nation'. In fact it was her seat as prime minister that needed saving after she lost a case brought against her for electoral corruption. During that Emergency, she put forward a Twenty Point Programme to which her unelected, unpleasant son, Sanjay, head of Youth Congress, added another four points. There was a seditious verse at the time: 'Son four, Mother twenty. Four and Twenty. Four hundred and twenty.' *Char Sau Bees*—420—was an article in the penal code concerning political corruption. The number is commonly used in India to describe a cheat. There was pressure on every local administration to show some sort of progressive action. In Churu, they decided to widen the narrow bazaar, beginning to demolish these façades before a general election unseated Indira Gandhi and her Emergency.





Rabu pulled up to buy chewing tobacco at one of the stalls at the central crossroads where the wider main bazaar ran away to the left or rose on the right through the main gate into the fort. After he'd taken his fix, we continued northwards through a double bend marking another town gate onto the sandy, unmetalled roads of the

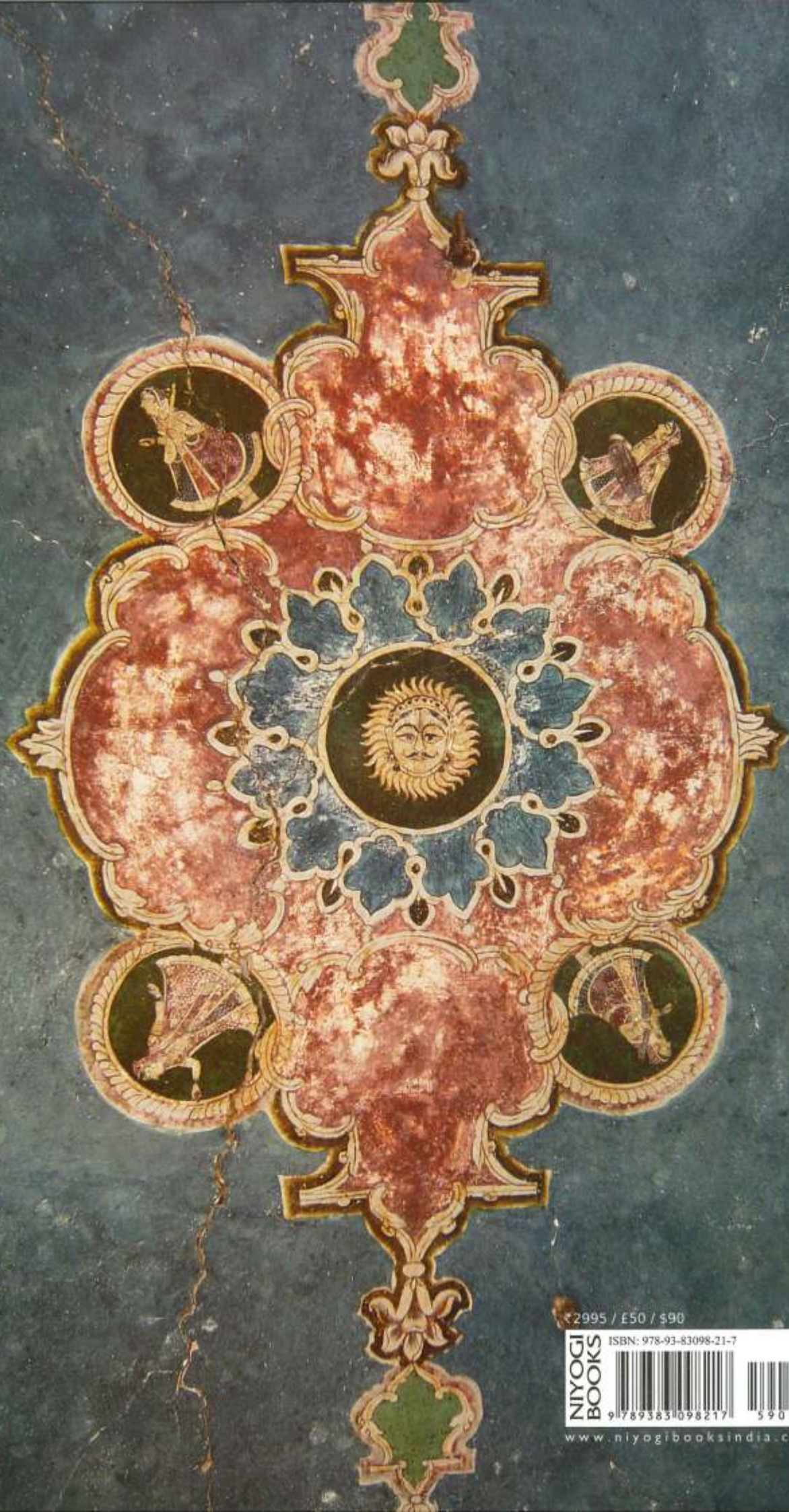
northern suburbs. The kids at Rabu's house were equally sensitive to the thudding of the Enfield and by the time we reached it they were pulling back the leaves of the tall metal gate ready for us. There was a routine. I had to vacate my seat and the smaller kids piled onto the bike to be driven up the ramp into the courtyard.

On the edge of Churu, a farmer ploughs, ready for the monsoon. Black camels are prized here.

#### NOTES:

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Lockett, 'Lockett Report', 9<sup>th</sup> May.





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