

Commerce and Ritual at the Pushkar Fair

by Doranne Jacobson

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One of India's greatest *melās* takes place annually at the small town of Pushkar in the heart of the northwest state of Rajasthan. With the approach of the auspicious full moon of the Hindu month of Kartik (October-November), some 200,000 pilgrims and traders journey across sere plains and arid uplands to gather for five days at Pushkar. Following ancient tradition, the travelers move in groups both large and small, journeying in bullock carts, buses and trains, riding horses and camels, or walking long distances on roads and rocky paths. Most are villagers from the surrounding region, an area known as Marwar, and are garbed in colorful turbans or brilliant embroidered saris and ornamented with gold and silver jewelry flashing in the sun. Tribal peoples join city dwellers in throngs, surging through the narrow streets of the town and clustering on the shores of Pushkar's sapphire-like sacred lake. Thousands crowd into religious hostels, while many more set up camp in the open sandy areas surrounding the lake and the town.

Pilgrims enter the Ranga Nath Temple, one of Pushkar's many Hindu houses of worship.
Photos by Doranne Jacobson



The primary goal of most travelers to the Pushkar fair is a ritually cleansing bath in the sacred lake at dawn on the full moon day (*pūr-nimā*). With this carefully-timed immersion, Hindus hope to wash away accrued sins and progress along the path toward salvation. Here, in a locale of great beauty and sanctity, each pilgrim can personally experience the touch of the divine. Indeed, Pushkar's many resident priests, whose income is almost completely derived from pilgrims' donations, proudly proclaim that, even though a Hindu may visit every other pilgrimage site in India, unless he visits Pushkar his efforts to attain salvation are for naught.

In this semi-desert region, Pushkar's welcome blue waters have long been considered sacred, as evidenced by a profusion of gold-tipped temples, domed pavilions and 52 sets of wide, marble bathing stairways ringing the lake. According to legend, the lake was formed when Brahmā, creator of the universe, cast a lotus blossom (or *pushkar*) to earth. On Kartik's full moon day he wished to perform a sacred fire sacrifice at the site, but his wife Sāvitrī was absent. Without a wife's assistance the sacrifice could not begin, so Brahmā hastily married a local milkmaid, Gāyatrī, and the couple commenced the ritual. When Sāvitrī arrived, she was enraged to see Gāyatrī sitting beside her husband. She cursed Brahmā, declaring, "No one will worship you in any other place but Pushkar." Indeed, her curse came true: on the banks of Lake Pushkar stands the only extant temple in all of India dedicated to Brahmā. Sāvitrī herself repaired to the top of a nearby hill, where she is honored in a small temple. These and Pushkar's many other temples are crowded with worshippers during Pushkar's fair.

Like most of India's holy sites, Pushkar lures travelers from near and far, drawing together the faithful to reaffirm their devotion to the divine and to Hinduism's lofty principles. Many of the visitors are Raj-

Village women arrive at the Pushkar fair, carrying bundles of clothing and food. They will camp out and prepare meals over small fires.



puts ("Sons of Princes"), heirs to a proud martial history of valor and virtue, now mostly farmers. Other pilgrims include craftspeople, herders, merchants and mendicants. For all, the ordinary routines of daily life are interrupted by the enthusiasm and pleasure of the pilgrimage. Hard-working, penurious peasants find in the pilgrimage a valid excuse for travel and recreation. For women of the region, most of whom are normally confined to their homesteads by the demands of work and codes of modesty, the Pushkar fair provides an especially welcome, community-approved opportunity to expand their first-hand knowledge of the wider world.

In semi-arid Marwar, the area surrounding Pushkar, settlements tend to be small and widely dispersed. The melā comprises an excellent venue for buying and selling essential goods and livestock, as well as seeing unusual sights. Travelers bargain for animals in a huge camel and cattle market at the fair site, make myriads of purchases at merchants' stalls, meet seldom-seen relatives and seek blessings from itinerant holy men. They also enjoy song-fests, equestrian competitions, games, carnival acts, ferris wheel rides and performances of traditional Rajasthani musical dramas. In recent years, village fairgoers have been particularly amused by the sight of foreign visitors — tourists, diplomats, hippies and even film stars — who have discovered the delights of the Pushkar fair.

Throughout the five days of the gathering, men water and feed their animals and quietly discuss sale prices with potential buyers. Trading in livestock is of particular importance at the melā, as it is at a large number of cattle fairs held regularly in Rajasthan and other parts of India. Most are more local in scope than Pushkar's renowned fair, but all serve as marts for valuable livestock, particularly draft animals. At Pushkar, camels and horses are uniquely prominent. It has been estimated that some 16,000 cattle, 12,000 camels, 2,000 horses and 3,000 donkeys, buffaloes, sheep and goats are offered for sale every year.

In Rajasthan, because climatic conditions vary greatly from year to year and place to place, and drought is not uncommon, many owners must sell their animals because of a current scarcity of fodder. Others sell to obtain ready cash or to dispose of surplus animals. Thus thousands of animals change hands, purchased by both individuals who need the animals' services to pull carts and plows or to supply milk and wool, and dealers who will trade the beasts yet again — often outside the state, where some breeds of Rajasthani cattle are much in demand. In this way, the fair aids the circulation of animals in accordance with changing ecological and economic conditions, while the local municipality, which oversees the fair, realizes an income worth many thousands of dollars through taxing each livestock sale.

At the Pushkar melā, Rajasthan's Animal Husbandry Department organizes a special program acknowledging the key roles of animals in the state's economy. Before an enthusiastic crowd in the fair's huge arena, farmers with prize animals receive ribbons and praise for their efforts. Thrilling horse and camel events follow, recalling traditional Rajput martial values. Beautifully decorated camels and their owners compete in obedience trials and races, while equestrians display incredible skills. Spectators roar with laughter at a camel strength contest in which the objecting beasts are loaded with as many riders as they can bear before kneeling and unceremoniously dumping their good-humored burdens to the ground.

Formal government-sponsored exhibits also seek to instruct the fair crowds on new agricultural methods and crops, family-planning goals and regional and national achievements. Such exhibits are meant to

enhance the fairgoers' sense of participation in their nation's rapid development.

Hundreds of merchants travel from the nearby city of Ajmer and other regions to provide for the pilgrims' material needs, while reaping substantial profits for themselves. Fees levied on the merchants add to the municipal coffers as well. Many merchants vend a variety of groceries and savory cooked foods, while others offer wooden camel saddles, bright appliquéd saddle blankets, embroidered horse decorations, embossed daggers and swords, painted metal storage chests, agricultural implements, bangles, ribbons, beads and brassware. Scarlet and gold tie-dyed saris and heather-toned woolen shawls lure customers, as do tangy snacks and medicines reputed to cure all ills. The frugal villagers bargain carefully for these items and dozens more, many of which are not readily available in their local bazaars.

Despite the Pushkar fair's numerous worldly attractions, the prime focus of virtually all visitors is the holy bath. At dawn on the full moon day, the mela's crescendo is reached on the misty shores of the lake. Lit by the golden rays of the rising sun, hymn-singing multitudes surge to the bathing steps. There they doff much of their heavy drapery, quickly dip into the chilly water and dress again. Guided by busy priests, they offer prayers and sacred foods to ancestors and deities, renewing their longstanding bonds to the past and expressing hopes for the future.

Pilgrims to Pushkar find in one bright package the satisfaction of conducting essential commercial transactions, the delights of recreation, the assurance of expanded knowledge, the contentment of reaffirming vital Rajasthani values and the serenity accompanying a deep sense of religious fulfillment. As the throngs leave Pushkar to return, renewed, to their daily lives, they carry with them vibrant memories of their experiences at Pushkar's glittering, jewel-like fair.

Suggested reading

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Bhattacharyya, Haridas, ed. *The Cultural Heritage of India IV, The Religions*. (Especially Chapter 35, "Pilgrimage and Fairs: Their Bearing on Indian Life," pp. 495-502.) Calcutta: The Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture, 1956.

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Lodrick, Deryck O. "A Cattle Fair in Rajasthan: The Kharwa Mela." *Current Anthropology* 25(2) (1984):218-225.

An enterprising woman sells fruit to passing pilgrims.

Rajput farmers peruse religious tracts at a merchant's stall.

