



FINDING
PANIHARI

*'A song of
fetching
water.'*

Thar desert | India

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ON THE ROAD

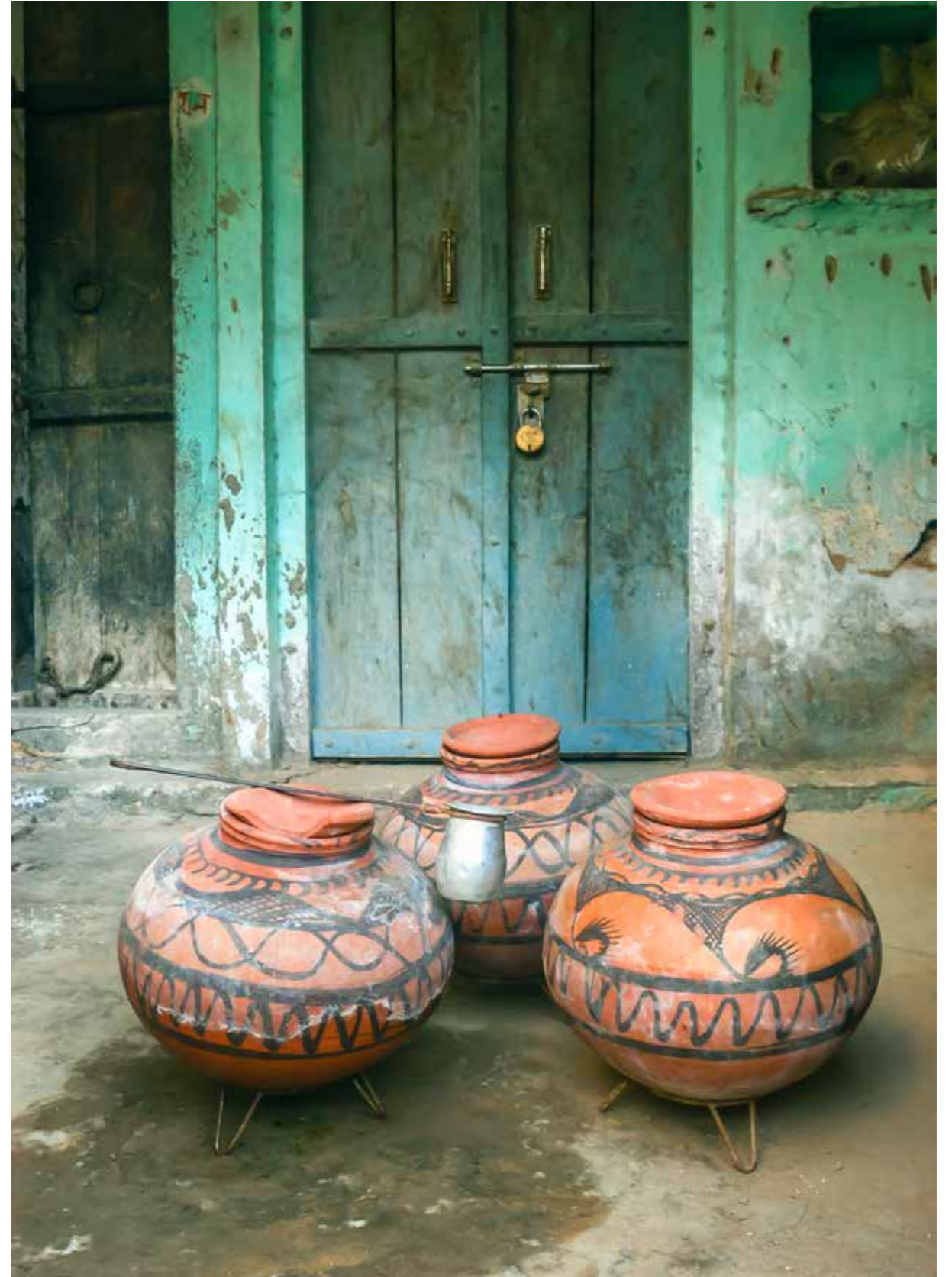


A long bus journey through the Indian Thar desert heading in the direction of the border with Pakistan. It is scorching hot, and I'm surprised to see the occasional bush dotting the desert landscape. They're thorny bushes that I often find myself entangled in, giving the Rajasthani women the pleasure of freeing me, yet again. Patiently, they pluck the sharp thorns from my clothing and sometimes my skin. They show me how their feet are calloused, that they can withstand a thorn or two after so many years. And the goats! How they daintily select something edible, navigating the thorns I fail to avoid. The bushes are essential for these animals — they provide just enough nourishment to survive and produce the bare minimum amount of milk. I sit with the women, drinking sweet goat's milk from cups that have long since lost their handles. As evening falls and the air turns cooler, the setting sun enhances the golden hues of the desert. From far away, we hear girls' voices approaching. They burst into the compound in a cloud of dust and head straight to the water pitchers. First, the herders drink, then the goats.

I follow the lead of the other women on the bus and stop drinking. There is nowhere along the way to relieve ourselves unobserved. The men clearly don't have the same concern. They have regular bus stops to urinate at their leisure. They are highly skilled drinkers — in a bus that never stops bouncing, they manage to quench their thirst without touching the bottle with their mouths even once. Now and again, I see a woman walking by with a large water jug on her head. The cloud of dust turned up by the bus disguises her, but the upright silhouette of a woman with two water jugs stacked upon her head is unmistakable. She must have walked a long way because I have not seen a water source from my vantage point on the bus. Nor is there any settlement for as far as I can see. Where is she headed? The bus stops. Outside, a jeep is waiting. The driver easily locates and waves to the passenger he has been waiting for, the only videshi, or foreigner, on the bus. A group of women get off the bus, too, and help each other lift heavy bags onto their heads. I see potatoes and sugar, salt and mustard oil, tomatoes, and large bags of lentils. They have been shopping at the market, which is anything but local, and now face a long walk home. We offer them a lift. In India, you can easily squeeze twelve people into a six-person open-top jeep. The driver settles himself behind the wheel. We load the supplies beside him, and the women take our seats in the back. Even before we set off, the atmosphere is festive. 'You don't have children,' squeals a woman in a bright pink odhni, a long piece of cloth, approximately two-and-a-half metres in length and worn as a veil.







She pinches my breast, and none too gently either, to confirm her suspicion. As I was getting on the bus, she and her companions noticed that my hips were not the hips of a woman who had borne children. 'What are you doing here? Just like that, without a man?' I tell them that I am a photographer in search of the song of 'Panihari'. The already noisy, bumpy, bouncy jeep ride suddenly becomes livelier and more joyous than a bus full of school children on a day out. In fits of laughter, we fly along, managing to stay ahead of a large cloud of rising desert sand. A man like the husband in Panihari, you mean? No, you won't find him waiting in our village. In our homes are hungry husbands for whom we bake chapati (flatbreads). Then the goats need to be returned for the night and the dishes scrubbed clean with ash.

Panihari is an old folk legend about a beautiful but lonely girl who walks to the lake every day to fetch drinking water. She married very young and has barely seen her husband because he had to leave immediately after the wedding. She misses him every day and dreams about a life that she doesn't have. One day, after filling her water jugs, a handsome man on a camel stops beside her. 'Why do you wait for a husband who is not here? Get on my camel and ride away with me!' Shocked by the man's advances, the girl runs back to the compound. She begins telling the story to her mother-in-law, when she suddenly notices the handsome man riding in on his camel. Upon his return, it turns out that he is the girl's husband, and he had recognised his beautiful wife by the lake with the water jugs. They live happily ever after.

Many versions of this story are sung in Rajasthan folk songs. The next day, when I join the same women to fetch water, I ask if they will sing the song for me. Dressed in stunning ghagra (embroidered and pleated skirts), choli (fitted tops) and odhni, they balance beautiful terracotta and brass water jugs on an idani, a cloth ring used to carry water jugs on the head. Water from the lake is filtered through cloth and stays cool for a long time. These pots are made of clay and are clearly preferred by the water carriers: the tiny pores allow evaporation so heat can escape from the water. As we walk back, they sing a cheerful version of Panihari. This time, they make it up as they go along. Does this videshi, this woman from far away, understand who is waiting for them at home, they sing, while they do all the work? Send us a foreigner on a camel! Elegantly, they walk past the bushes, amusing themselves as they go. And me? I'm tearing my clothes free from the vicious thorns once again.

