

Rural Heritage Matters

Newsletter of the Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development (ITRHD)

Inaugural Issue

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From the Desk of the Chairman

Welcome to the inaugural issue of **Rural Heritage Matters**, a curated monthly newsletter brought to you by the Indian Trust for Rural Heritage and Development (ITRHD).

India's rural landscape is not merely a geographic expanse; it is a living, breathing archive of intangible heritage, indigenous wisdom, vibrant sporting cultures, oral traditions, and timeless culinary arts. Across our villages and pastoral routes, communities have evolved intricate ways of living that balance human well-being with ecological harmony. Yet, as modernity accelerates, much of this invaluable legacy faces the risk of fading into quiet obscurity.

The launch of *Rural Heritage Matters* stems from three core objectives:

- **Distilling Knowledge:** This newsletter is designed to summarize and spotlight the extensive, research-intensive publications of ITRHD into concise, engaging, and accessible reads for a broader audience.
- **Fostering Dialogue:** We aim to establish a regular, dynamic channel of communication and meaningful dialogue with scholars, practitioners, rural enthusiasts, and all patrons committed to India's heritage.
- **Inspiring Action & Preservation:** By showcasing the resilience, ingenuity, and cultural depth of rural communities—from the Thar Desert to the hills of Mizoram—we hope to catalyze community-led conservation, sustainable cultural tourism, and policy advocacy.

In this opening issue, we explore five distinct dimensions of India's rural heritage: the medicinal botany of Thar desert camel herders; the rich social and performing tapestry of the Mizo community; the socio-cultural evolution of wrestling and kabaddi in rural Haryana; the sacred, portable shrine storytelling of Rajasthan's Kaavad tradition; and the expansive, flavorful world of Gujarati regional fare.

We invite you to read, reflect, and journey with us in celebrating and safeguarding the living traditions that truly make our heritage matter.

S. K. Misra
Chairman

Desert Dispensary: The Healing Flora of the Thar Herders

The Nomads of the Sands

In the vast, shimmering expanse of the Thar Desert, survival has never been a passive affair. For centuries, the **Raika** community—the legendary nomadic camel herders of North-West India—has walked the arid terrain of Rajasthan, migrating with vast herds of camels, sheep, and goats as far as Gujarat, Malwa, and Punjab. Traveling with their entire families and livestock, the Raikas accumulated an encyclopedic understanding of desert ecology. They knew precisely which wild scrub would sweeten a camel's milk, which grass offered peak monsoon nutrition, and which prickly bush could heal a traveling herder's fractured bone or pounding headache.

While modern commercial medicine and rapid infrastructural changes have begun to replace these age-old remedies, the Raika ethno-botanical medicine chest remains a masterclass in living off what the desert provides.



Photo Credit: Tarun Chauhan

The Thar Pharmacy: A Guide to Desert Remedies

To an untrained eye, the Thar looks barren; to a Raika elder, it is a well-stocked pharmacy. Here are some of the remarkable indigenous plants that have sustained both humans and animals across generations:

- **Kumatiyo (*Acacia senegal*):** A thorny native tree famous for yielding gum arabic. While its seeds are gathered to make traditional vegetables, the Raikas cook the gum directly in pure desi ghee to treat severe arthritis and joint stiffness—an ancient formulation that would make modern supplement makers take notes.
- **Thor (*Euphorbia caducifolia*):** Standing tall as the multi-stemmed, prickly succulent emblem of the Thar, Thor is the desert's answer to gastric distress. The Raikas collect

and boil its flowers into a potent herbal decoction to treat stomach aches and soothe digestion.



- **Aakado (*Calotropis procera*):** A hardy, ubiquitous desert shrub bearing striking flowers. Whenever a herder suffers from a crippling headache after long hours under the blistering sun, fresh Aakado leaves are bound snugly across the forehead as a natural compress to draw out the pain.
- **Bekario (*Indigofera cordifolia*):** This widespread ephemeral desert herb is boiled down into a warm medicinal broth by the pastoralists to fight off respiratory infections and pneumonia.

Aakado, Photo Credit: Pradip Krishen

- **Kair (*Capparis decidua*):** A spiny shrub featuring dense green leafless branches that burst into bright orange blossoms twice a year. The Raikas boil these vibrant flowers to prepare a restorative remedy for stubborn stomach upsets.
- **Kumbhi (*Podaxis pistillaris*):** Highly prized desert mushrooms gathered during pastoral treks. Dried and ground into flour, Kumbhi is cooked in rich ghee and fed to patients to accelerate the knitting of bone fractures and cure skeletal aches.
- **Peeloo (*Salvadora persica*):** Known locally as *Jaal*, this character-rich desert tree provides a dense canopy of fleshy green leaves and peppery little berries. Packed with nutrients, Peeloo berries serve as the ultimate natural superfood snack relished by Raika children out in the pastures.

Preserving Intangible Desert Heritage

As development brings convenient modern alternatives, this oral compendium of traditional botanical wisdom is rapidly disappearing. Safeguarding the customs, botanical heritage, and lore of the Raikas is vital—not only as history, but as an irreplaceable system of sustainable desert living.

Note: This article is based on the original publication “Traditional Wisdom of the Camel Herders of the Thar Desert” by Thakur Nahar Singh Jasol, published in an earlier ITRHD publication (*Traditional Healing Systems of India*).

Land of Music and Bamboo: Cultural Heritage of the Mizos

Highland Roots and Ancient Pathways



Perched along the rugged mountain ranges of North East India, Mizoram—the 23rd State of the Indian Union—is a land of dramatic ridges, mist-covered valleys, and an extraordinary cultural ethos. Bound by Myanmar and Bangladesh, the Mizo people trace their lineage through rich oral memory, folk epics, and ancient migratory trails that crossed Yunnan and the Chin Hills.

At the very core of historic Mizo society was the mountain-top village, organized around the chief's residence and the **Zawlbuk**—the bachelor's dormitory. The Zawlbuk was far more than sleeping quarters; it was a physical academy where young men learned tribal lore, discipline, civic responsibility, and the cardinal Mizo ethical principle: **Tlawmngaihna**—an unwritten, noble moral code demanding selflessness, hospitality, courage, and putting the welfare of others before oneself.

The Rhythm of Agriculture: The Three Great Kuts

As traditional shifting agriculturalists (*jhum* cultivators), the annual rhythm of Mizo life was paced by three grand seasonal festivals known as *Kuts*:

- **Chapchar Kut (The Spring Festival):** The grandest and most joyful of all Mizo festivals. Celebrated in late February or early March when felled jungle timber is left drying under the sun, it is a multi-day jubilee of singing, feast platters, rice beer (*zu*), and community bonding. Historically celebrated as a time "to celebrate one's own head"—unburdened by life's anxieties—villagers would gather in the chief's courtyard



Chapchar Kut celebration

to feed each other cooked meats and rice. Legend humorously recounts that in the village of Chawngtui, the celebration went on so enthusiastically and endlessly that the villagers exhausted their entire grain reserve and had to temporarily disperse to find food!

- **Mim Kut (The Autumn Remembrance):** A solemn festival observed in August or September following the harvest of early maize (*vaimim*). Unlike the merriment of other festivals, Mim Kut was a poignant memorial honoring departed relatives, where first fruits were offered to the spirits of the dead before their final spiritual journey.
- **Pawl Kut (The Harvest Thanksgiving):** Celebrated in January after the main paddy harvest, Pawl Kut was primarily a beloved festival for children and families. Known for the heartwarming custom of *chhawngnhawt*—where children in festive finery fed one another choice delicacies—it fostered complete social equality, community unity, and gratitude for a bountiful harvest.

Dances of Agility, Valor, and World Records

Mizo community dances are dynamic living expressions developed under the influence of mountain winds, wildlife, and community camaraderie:

Cheraw (The Bamboo Dance): The most renowned and visually captivating Mizo dance. Skilled male beaters rhythmically clap horizontal and cross bamboo staves against the ground, while dancers step swiftly between the closing timber in intricate patterns mimicking birds and swaying branches. As the old saying wryly cautions, the nimble dancer finds grace, while the novice dancer's ankles receive a sharp nip! In March 2010, the city of Aizawl made global history by setting a Guinness World Record with **10,736 dancers** performing Cheraw together in synchronized rhythm.

- **Sarlamkai (Solakia):** An impressive, solemn warrior victory dance from southern Mizoram, performed to the resonance of gongs and drums without singing, celebrating courage and martial valor.
- **Chheih-Lam & Khuallam:** *Chheih-Lam* is a lively, impromptu evening performance recited over rounds of rice beer to recount heroic tales and welcome guests. *Khuallam* ("Dance of the Guests") is performed by visitors dressed in exquisite woven *Puandum* cloths during grand *Khuangchawi* ceremonies.

Rooted in timeless proverbs like "*Sem sem dam dam, ei bil thi thi*" (Those who share survive; those who hoard perish), the folkloric heritage of Mizoram remains an enduring beacon of fraternity and community solidarity.



Note: This article is based on the original publication “Cultural Heritage of the Mizos” by Prof. Laltluangliana Khiangte, published in an earlier ITRHD publication (Tribal Culture of India).

From Akharas to Olympic Mats: Sporting Revolution of Haryana

The Ancient Soil of Combat

Scratch the modern, industrial surface of Haryana, and you immediately strike an uninterrupted stream of ancient martial culture. From the Indus Valley site of Rakhigarhi to the historical grounds of the Mahabharata, Haryana has always revered physical strength and tactical combat. In Assandh, locals proudly point to a massive mound known as *Jarasandh ka Teela*—believing it to be the ancient *akhara* where Jarasandh practiced *malla-yuddh* (ancient wrestling), even though archeologists identify it as a historic Buddhist stupa!

This conviction simply highlights how deeply wrestling is ingrained in the soul of Haryana. Ancient *malla-yuddh* was a no-holds-barred gladiator combat where breaking joints and incapacitating opponents were legitimate aims. Over centuries, this fierce combat discipline synthesized with Persian *varzesh-e pahlavāni* under Mughal patronage, birthing traditional Indian *pahalwani*. The lethal violence was toned down, rules of submission were instituted, and wrestling transformed into a revered rural sport.

The Culture of the Village Akhara

In rural Haryana, akharas are not merely sports clubs; they are sacred institutions of discipline, strict celibacy, and intense physical conditioning. Linked spiritually to Lord Hanuman—whom local tradition reveres as having been born in Kaithal—learning to wrestle was almost a civic duty.



Villages frequently house multiple akharas, often founded by veteran wrestlers eager to train young talent in their own distinct techniques. Supported by their families and local patrons, young pahalwans fueled their rigorous training with legendary diets of fresh milk, almonds, and desi ghee.

The Mat Revolution and Gender Transformation

For decades following K.D. Jadhav's 1952 Olympic bronze medal, India remained largely indifferent to modern freestyle mat wrestling. But at the turn of the millennium, Haryana made an astonishing leap from red-earth mud pits to synthetic Olympic mats. Wrestlers quickly realized that international glory required agile footwork, scientific scoring, and intellectual strategy alongside brute force. The trailblazing Olympic medals won by Sushil Kumar and Yogeshwar Dutt ignited a nationwide sports revolution.



Even more profound was the social transformation that followed. In a traditionally patriarchal society, young women stepped into the wrestling arena, shattered stereotypes, and won global accolades. Spearheaded by Geetika Jakhar and the Phogat sisters, and crowned by Sakshi Malik's historic bronze medal at the 2016 Rio Olympics, female wrestlers transformed rural Haryana's mindset. Families who once guarded conservative conventions became the fiercest champions of their daughters' athletic dreams.

The Resurgence of Kabaddi

A parallel transformation reshaped Kabaddi. Originating as a raw, circular trial of strength and raiding skill in the rural dust, Haryana rapidly adapted to standardized national rules, 7-player teams, and indoor mat courts. Today, backed by corporate sponsorships, professional leagues, and television broadcasts, kabaddi and wrestling have demonstrated that rural traditions, when given modern wings, can capture the world stage.

Note: This article is based on the original publication “Rural Sports – A Way of Life in Haryana” by Harbans Singh, published in an earlier ITRHD publication (Rural Sports & Games of India).



The Painted Shrine: Kaavad Storytelling of Rajasthan A Temple at Your Doorstep

Storytelling is humankind's oldest art form, but in Rajasthan, it takes on a mesmerizing, sacred dimension through **Kaavad Banchana**—the 400-year-old oral storytelling tradition that brings a portable wooden shrine directly into the homes of devotees.

The Kaavad is a brightly painted, intricate wooden cabinet featuring numerous hinged panels that unfold layer by layer like the opening doors and sanctums of a grand temple. As the itinerant bard unfolds each painted threshold, he takes his listeners on a visual and spiritual pilgrimage through the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Puranic legends, and personal family genealogies.



The Sacred Triad: Maker, Teller, and Patron

The survival of the Kaavad tradition rests upon a remarkable symbiotic triangle among three distinct communities, each dependent on the other for its livelihood and social identity:

The Makers (Suthars / Basayatis): Residing in the artisanal village of Bassi near Chittorgarh, the Suthar carpenters trace their divine lineage directly to Lord Visvakarma, the architect of the universe. According to origin myths, the Suthars settled in Bassi in the 16th century, and only a select few families retain the exclusive sacred craft of building and hand-painting these multi-doored wooden shrines.

- **The Storytellers (Kaavadiya Bhats):** Hailing from Marwar and surrounding districts, these wandering bards carry the Kaavad on their shoulders. Tracing their mythic

heritage to Shravan Kumar (who carried his blind parents on a shoulder-yoke) and invoking Goddess Sarasvati to bless their tongues, they preserve phenomenal oral memories. During the monsoon—when the gods are believed to sleep—the bards tend farms or work as masons, only to pick up their shrines each dry season to visit their patrons.

- **The Patrons (*Jajmans*):** Distributed across 36 traditional castes throughout Rajasthan, hereditary patron families welcome the storyteller into their homes once a year. For the patrons, hosting the Kaavad sanctifies their home, offering all the spiritual merit of a distant pilgrimage.

Myths of Memory and Generosity

When the Kaavadiya Bhat opens the shrine, he recites the patron's ancestral tree and points to the painted images of patrons and benefactors on the shrine panels. Seeing their ancestors safely depicted alongside gods and saints brings immense emotional satisfaction to the household.

This relationship is cemented through caste origin myths. For instance, the Jat community myth recounts that when the first Jats were created from Lord Shiva's matted locks, they asked how to attain salvation. Shiva instructed them to practice charity, rubbing ash from his brow to create the first storyteller as the rightful recipient of their gifts. In return for preserving family memory and singing sacred verses, patrons reward the bard with grain, livestock, textiles, and cash.

Through paint, wood, and oral verse, the Kaavad remains an extraordinary example of community integrity, where art, myth, and daily life merge into a seamless sacred narrative.

Note: This article is based on the original publication “The Kaavad Storytelling Tradition of Rajasthan” by Dr. Nina Sabnani, published in an earlier ITRHD publication (Oral Traditions, Myths & Legends of India).



The Grand Gujarati Feast: Flavors of the Western Coast

The Magic of Salt and the Architecture of the Thali

Every time you savor a meal in India, you are enjoying a taste of Gujarat. Producing nearly 80% of the country's salt, Gujarat honors this staple as **Sabras**—literally "the essence of all tastes". On New Year's Day during Diwali, salt vendors roam neighborhoods calling "*Sabras lo!*", gifting salt crystals to households to usher in year-round prosperity and good fortune.

Beyond salt, Gujarat gave Indian cuisine one of its greatest culinary marvels: the **Gujarati Thali**. Far from a random platter, the thali is a masterclass in nutritional balance, vibrant color, and gastronomic satisfaction. Arranged with precision, it surrounds the diner with a constellation of metal bowls (*katoris* or *vadkis*) featuring seasonal vegetables, pulses (*kathol*), sweet-and-sour *kadhi*, *daal*, *raita*, crisp *farsan*, *kachumber* salad, fresh chutneys, pickles, and piping hot rotlis or rotlas served continuously alongside chilled *chaas* (buttermilk).



Historically, the richness of a banquet was measured by the number of bowls served—from a simple four-bowl meal to an elaborate 8-vadki nu jaman!

A Heritage Shaped by Global Trade and Enterprise

Gujaratis have long been intrepid traders and sea-farers, establishing historic mercantile links from the ancient ports of Surat, Bharuch, and Khambhat to East Africa, Burma, the Middle East, and the West. As Gujaratis traveled the globe, they carried their culinary ingenuity with them while enthusiastically adapting foreign ingredients into their home kitchens:

- In Rajkot, local stores stock authentic ingredients for Sudanese dishes favored by returning diaspora families.
- In Rander near Surat, street markets thrive during Ramzan serving unique Burmese-inspired delicacies that draw food lovers from miles away.
- The globe-trotting Gujarati vegetarian single-handedly popularized specialized vegetarian and Jain dining options across international airlines and global restaurants.

From Rustic Hearth to Royal Palaces

The true culinary genius of Gujarat lies in its diverse regional expressions:

The Earthy Charm of Undhiya and Ubadiya: The celebrated *Undhiya* originated not in luxury kitchens, but as a rustic winter field feast. Farmers packed freshly harvested potatoes, brinjals, tender beans, and sweet potatoes with ajwain, spices, and oil inside clay pots (*matkas*).

The pots were sealed with wild herbs, buried upside-down (*undhu*) in the ground, and slow-baked under open hay fires (*bhadko*). Its rustic South Gujarat sibling, *Ubadiya*, remains a mouth-watering highway favorite baked roadside across Valsad and Vapi.

- **Leftover Ingenuity:** In rural homes, nothing is wasted. Hearty millet *rotlas* or leftover rotis from the night before are broken into pieces and transformed into spicy, tempered *Vaghareli Rotli*—a dish so comforting it has sparked playful dining table squabbles in urban and rural households alike!
- **Darbar Feasts and Parsi Heritage:** Beyond its famous vegetarian fare, Gujarat boasts rich non-vegetarian legacies. The kitchens of royal *Darbagadhs* historically perfected exquisite game preparations like *Mokal Bhavnagar* and *Kofta Saleem*. Meanwhile, the coastal Parsi community—who sweetened their welcome in Sanjan by stirring sugar into a brimming bowl of milk—blended Persian traditions with Gujarati spices to create culinary gems like the rare sweet *Eedapak*.

Whether it is Mandvi’s spicy *Kachchhi Dabeli*, crisp morning *fafda-jalebi*, or a traditional wedding feast, the cuisine of Gujarat celebrates life with every bite.



Note: This article is based on the original publication “The Big, Fat Gujju Thali!” by Sandhya Bordewekar Gajjar, published in an earlier ITRHD publication (Traditional Cuisines of India).

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