

# Food and Survival in Desert Rajasthan: A Historical Analysis of Dietary Practices and Environmental Adaptation, 1700–1900

**Reetu Parmar**

Assistant Professor

History, Govt. College, Dhariyawad, Dist. Pratapgarh, Rajasthan.

## **Abstract:**

Food in desert Rajasthan was never merely a matter of taste or household routine. Between 1700 and 1900, dietary practices in the arid regions of Rajasthan developed as a practical response to climate, scarcity, mobility, caste customs, pastoral life, local ecology and political conditions. The limited availability of water, irregular rainfall, recurrent droughts and dependence on hardy grains shaped a food culture that was deeply connected with survival. This paper examines the historical relationship between food habits and environmental adaptation in desert Rajasthan during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. It discusses the role of millet, pulses, dried vegetables, dairy products, wild foods, preserved ingredients and community-based food practices in sustaining rural society. The study also highlights how food practices reflected social hierarchy, gendered labour, religious values and local knowledge systems. By viewing food as a cultural and ecological resource, the paper shows that desert communities created resilient dietary patterns suited to difficult living conditions. The study concludes that the food culture of desert Rajasthan represents an important historical record of human adaptation, social organisation and indigenous wisdom.

**Keywords:** Rajasthan, desert society, food history, dietary practices, survival, traditional knowledge.

## **1.1 INTRODUCTION**

Rajasthan has long been recognised for its historical richness, royal traditions, folk culture, fairs, festivals, music, oral narratives and distinctive regional identity. Its cultural landscape has often been described through forts, palaces, paintings, folklore, festivals and traditional performances, yet food also forms an equally important part of this cultural inheritance. Existing studies on Rajasthan's culture show that the region's identity developed through the interaction of history, geography, ecology and social life, particularly in areas shaped by desert conditions and scarce natural resources. Food, therefore, cannot be studied only as cuisine. In the desert regions of Rajasthan, food was a means of survival, a marker of social identity and a practical response to environmental uncertainty.

The period from 1700 to 1900 was marked by political changes, local state formation, changing agrarian arrangements, recurrent droughts and shifting patterns of rural livelihood. In such conditions, communities in western and north western Rajasthan developed food habits that were closely suited to dry climate, limited irrigation and uncertain harvests. Grains such as bajra, jowar and moth became central because they could withstand poor rainfall and remain useful for long periods. Dried vegetables, preserved berries, curd, buttermilk, ghee and coarse cereals formed the basis of everyday nutrition. These foods were not accidental choices. They reflected generations of observation, adjustment and practical knowledge.

The study of dietary practices in desert Rajasthan also helps in understanding wider social life. Food connected the household with the field, the cattle shed, the village economy, caste customs, religious

practices and seasonal movement. Women played a central role in storing, processing and preserving food, while pastoral communities depended heavily on milk based products and mobile food habits. In famine years, the ability to use drought resistant grains, wild plants and preserved foods became crucial. Thus, the history of food in desert Rajasthan is also a history of endurance, adaptation and community intelligence.

## 1.2 HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL BACKGROUND

The desert regions of Rajasthan are largely associated with the Thar Desert and the adjoining dry zones of Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaisalmer, Barmer, Nagaur and parts of Shekhawati and Marwar. The area is characterised by low rainfall, sandy soil, high temperatures, sparse vegetation and frequent drought. The Aravalli range and certain semi arid tracts offered relatively better ecological conditions, but large parts of western Rajasthan remained dependent on uncertain monsoon rains. The geographical character of the region strongly influenced its agriculture, settlement pattern, food habits and social organisation.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, desert Rajasthan was divided into several princely states and local chiefdoms. Rajput rulers, merchant communities, pastoral groups, peasants, artisans and religious institutions formed an interconnected social order. Political authority often depended on land revenue, cattle wealth, trade routes and control over scarce resources. In this wider setting, food was closely linked with both economy and ecology. The availability of grain depended on rainfall, while access to milk, ghee and curd depended on livestock. Trade brought salt, spices, jaggery and certain luxury items, but ordinary rural households mainly relied on locally available produce.

Geography also shaped cooking methods. Since fuel and water were limited in many desert settlements, food preparation had to be economical. Dishes that required less water, could be stored for longer periods or could be prepared with minimal ingredients became common. Thick rotis made from coarse grains, dried preparations, roasted grains and dairy based accompaniments were practical in such conditions. This ecological simplicity gave desert food its distinctive character.

## 1.3 FOOD, CLIMATE AND SURVIVAL

In desert Rajasthan, climate was the strongest force behind dietary practice. Irregular rainfall made crop production uncertain, while drought cycles affected both agriculture and livestock. Communities therefore preferred foods that were hardy, filling and capable of storage. Bajra became one of the most important grains because it could grow in dry land and provide strength for labour intensive rural life. Bajra roti, often eaten with buttermilk, curd, onion, garlic chutney or dried vegetable preparations, became a staple food across many desert households.

Pulses such as moth, moong and gram also held importance because they could be grown in relatively harsh conditions and provided protein in a largely cereal based diet. These pulses were used in simple curries, dry preparations, roasted forms and flour based dishes. Their value increased during scarcity because they could be stored and used gradually. In many households, food storage was not only a domestic activity but a survival strategy.

The use of dried foods was another important adaptation. Ker, sangri, kumat, dried chillies, dried leafy vegetables and preserved berries became central to desert food culture. These ingredients could be collected seasonally, dried and used when fresh vegetables were unavailable. Such practices show that desert communities had a deep understanding of local ecology. They knew which plants could be eaten, when they should be collected, how they should be dried and how they could be cooked during lean periods.

#### **1.4 DAIRY PRODUCTS AND PASTORAL LIFE**

Livestock played a major role in the diet of desert Rajasthan. Cows, buffaloes, goats, sheep and camels were not only economic assets but also sources of nutrition. Milk, curd, buttermilk and ghee formed an important part of daily consumption, especially among pastoral and agro pastoral communities. In areas where agriculture was uncertain, animal products provided a measure of food security. Buttermilk was especially significant because it helped in coping with heat, supported digestion and accompanied coarse grain meals.

Ghee held both nutritional and cultural value. It was used in cooking, religious offerings, festive foods and strengthening diets. However, its use varied according to class and economic position. Wealthier households could consume more ghee, sweets and richer preparations, while poorer groups used it sparingly. This difference shows that food habits also reflected social and economic inequality.

Pastoral communities developed mobile food practices suited to movement across grazing lands. Their diet often relied on milk, curd, coarse grain flour, roasted grains and easily carried foods. Camel milk also held importance in some desert areas. The pastoral food system was shaped by mobility, season, animal health and access to grazing grounds. Thus, dairy based food habits reveal the close relationship between environment, livelihood and diet.

#### **1.5 PRESERVATION, STORAGE AND INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE**

Food preservation was one of the most important survival skills in desert Rajasthan. Scarcity demanded planning, and households prepared for difficult months by storing grains, drying vegetables, preserving spices and maintaining dairy products in usable forms. Earthen pots, grain bins, leather containers, cloth bags and raised storage spaces were used to protect food from heat, insects and moisture. These methods were simple but effective.

Women were central to this knowledge system. They cleaned grain, dried vegetables, prepared papads, preserved spices, churned curd, made ghee and managed household food reserves. Their labour ensured continuity between harvest and scarcity. In this sense, the food history of desert Rajasthan cannot be separated from women's domestic knowledge. Although formal histories often overlook such work, it was essential for survival.

Indigenous knowledge also included the careful use of wild and semi wild foods. During scarcity, people used edible grasses, seeds, roots, berries and local plants. Such foods were not always part of ordinary meals but became important during drought or famine. The ability to identify safe and useful plants was inherited through oral tradition and everyday practice. This knowledge helped communities face environmental uncertainty long before modern relief systems became organised.

#### **1.6 CASTE, COMMUNITY AND FOOD PRACTICES**

Food in Rajasthan was also shaped by caste, religion and community identity. Different groups followed distinct rules regarding cooking, sharing, purity, fasting and festive consumption. Brahmins, Rajputs, Baniyas, Jats, pastoral castes, artisan communities and marginal groups did not always eat the same food in the same way. Social hierarchy influenced access to grain, milk, meat, sweets and ceremonial food.

Vegetarian food was widely present, especially among Vaishnav, Jain and merchant communities. Lentils, cereals, milk products and sweets formed an important part of their food habits. Rajput and some pastoral groups consumed meat, particularly in ceremonial and martial contexts, though availability and status influenced such practices. The second sample paper also notes the importance of Rajasthani cuisine,

including vegetarian dishes, dairy based preparations, kachori, ghewar and traditional food items associated with regional identity.

Food sharing was important during festivals, marriages, fairs and religious occasions. Community feasts reflected social bonds but also reinforced hierarchy. The type of food served, seating arrangements and who cooked the meal were all socially meaningful. Thus, dietary history provides insight into both unity and division within rural society.

### **1.7 FESTIVALS, FAIRS AND SEASONAL FOOD**

Fairs and festivals played an important role in the food culture of rural Rajasthan. They provided occasions for special dishes, sweets, offerings and collective eating. Seasonal festivals were closely linked with agriculture, monsoon hopes, cattle wealth and religious devotion. Foods prepared during festivals were different from ordinary meals because they used more ghee, jaggery, wheat, milk and spices.

In desert society, festive food carried emotional importance. It gave relief from the monotony of coarse everyday meals and marked moments of joy, devotion and social gathering. Ghewar, churma, lapsi, kheer, malpua and other sweet preparations were associated with celebration, while bajra, pulses and dried vegetables remained central to routine life. This difference between daily food and festive food shows how desert communities balanced scarcity with celebration.

Fairs also connected food with trade and mobility. Travellers, traders, pilgrims, performers and rural communities gathered at fairs where food stalls, local snacks and temporary markets became part of the cultural experience. Such gatherings helped circulate ingredients, tastes and food practices across regions. In this way, fairs and festivals contributed to both cultural preservation and social exchange.

### **1.8 FOOD DURING DROUGHT AND FAMINE**

Drought was a recurring reality in desert Rajasthan. When rains failed, food systems came under severe pressure. Grain prices rose, fodder became scarce, livestock weakened and migration increased. In such periods, households depended on stored grain, dried foods, wild plants, diluted milk products and community support. The poor were most affected because they had fewer reserves and limited access to livestock.

Famine food often differed from ordinary food. People consumed coarse substitutes, wild seeds, leaves and less preferred grains. Meals became fewer and thinner. Buttermilk, gruel and roasted grain were used when available. Such practices reveal the harshness of survival, but they also show the resilience of local communities. The ability to stretch limited food resources was an inherited skill shaped by repeated experience of scarcity.

Traditional food systems did not remove suffering, but they reduced vulnerability to some extent. Storage practices, drought resistant crops, livestock reliance and knowledge of edible plants formed a practical survival framework. This framework was not written in formal manuals; it existed in household memory, oral instruction and rural habit.

### **1.9 TRADE, MARKETS AND CHANGING DIETS**

Although desert Rajasthan depended heavily on local produce, trade also influenced food habits. Merchant routes connected Rajasthan with Gujarat, Sindh, Punjab, Delhi and Central India. Salt, spices, jaggery, dry fruits, wheat and luxury food items moved through trade networks. Towns such as Jodhpur, Bikaner, Jaipur and Jaisalmer became important centres where rural products and external goods met.

Urban and elite diets were more varied than rural diets. Royal and noble households had access to richer foods, meat dishes, sweets, refined grains and elaborate preparations. By contrast, rural households remained closer to coarse cereals, pulses and dairy. However, markets gradually introduced new tastes and ingredients even into smaller settlements. The nineteenth century also saw changing patterns of administration, transport and trade under colonial influence, which slowly affected food availability and consumption.

Despite these changes, the basic desert diet remained remarkably stable because ecology continued to shape everyday life. Food practices changed at the edges, but the core logic of survival, storage and adaptation persisted.

### **1.10 CULINARY HERITAGE AND CULTURAL IDENTITY**

The food culture of desert Rajasthan is now often celebrated as heritage cuisine, but its historical roots lie in necessity. Dishes such as bajra roti, ker sangri, gatte, rabri, churma and dal baati reflect adaptation to limited water, dry climate and available resources. What is now presented as regional cuisine was once part of everyday survival. This transformation from necessity to heritage is important because it shows how hardship can become cultural identity over time.

Rajasthan's tourism image today often highlights royal food, desert festivals, hospitality and colourful cuisine. However, the deeper historical meaning of these foods must not be lost. Desert food was not only colourful or flavourful; it was practical, ecological and socially grounded. It represented the intelligence of communities that learned to live with scarcity rather than against it.

Preserving this food heritage requires more than promoting famous dishes. It also requires documenting village level food practices, women's knowledge, drought foods, pastoral diets, storage methods and seasonal eating habits. Without such documentation, the survival history embedded in food may be reduced to tourism display.

### **1.11 METHODOLOGY**

This paper is descriptive and historical in nature. It is based on secondary sources such as books, journal articles, published research papers and studies related to Rajasthan's culture, history, food practices, folklore and tourism. The study follows a qualitative approach and uses narrative discussion to understand how food habits in desert Rajasthan developed in relation to ecology, society and survival. The paper also draws thematic support from existing studies on Rajasthan's cultural identity, regional cuisine, festivals and preservation. The focus is not on statistical measurement but on historical interpretation and cultural understanding.

### **1.12 DISCUSSION**

The dietary practices of desert Rajasthan between 1700 and 1900 show a close relationship between environment and society. Food habits were shaped by water scarcity, limited agriculture, pastoral mobility, recurrent drought and the need for long term storage. Coarse grains, pulses, dried vegetables and dairy products formed the foundation of survival. These foods were practical because they suited local conditions and could sustain rural households through difficult seasons.

The study also shows that food was not only an ecological response but a social institution. Caste, religion, gender, class and community customs influenced what people ate, how they prepared it and with whom they shared it. Women's role in preservation and household food management was especially important. Pastoral communities contributed dairy based practices, while fairs and festivals added ceremonial meaning to food.

The history of food in desert Rajasthan therefore offers a wider understanding of rural life. It reveals how communities created systems of resilience through everyday practice. Their food culture was not developed through abundance but through careful management of scarcity. This makes it an important subject for historical and cultural study.

### 1.13 CONCLUSION

Food and survival in desert Rajasthan were deeply connected during the period from 1700 to 1900. The harsh climate, uncertain rainfall and limited resources shaped a dietary system based on coarse grains, pulses, dried vegetables, dairy products and preserved foods. These practices reflected the practical intelligence of rural communities that learned to adapt to scarcity through careful storage, seasonal planning and ecological knowledge. Food also carried social, cultural and religious meanings, linking households with caste customs, pastoral life, festivals, fairs and community identity. The study shows that the food culture of desert Rajasthan should not be understood only as cuisine or tourism attraction. It is a historical record of adaptation, labour, resilience and indigenous knowledge. In the present time, when traditional food practices are often commercialised or forgotten, there is a need to document and preserve the deeper survival wisdom behind them. The dietary traditions of desert Rajasthan continue to remind us that culture is not only created in courts, temples and festivals, but also in kitchens, fields, cattle sheds and the daily struggle to live with dignity in a difficult environment.

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