

The White Desert

By Shabnum Gul

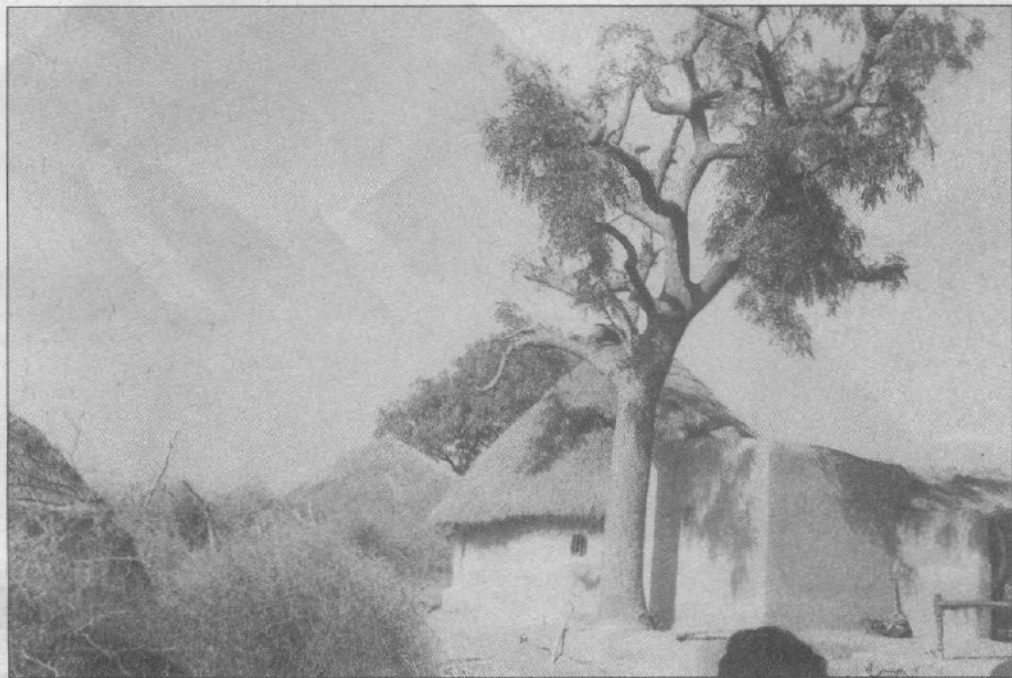
Cities & Regions Down 25-1-04

Contrary to common perception, Thar is not just about bone-dry loneliness. A part of it has forests, honey bees and thriving wildlife

IF you have never travelled along with the desert and never smelt its wild flowers, dazzled by its colours and captured by its hospitality, then your journey is fragmentary. When, I traverse the White Desert, I travel with its varied culture, lakes, places, forts festooned with legends.

This experience discovers more exquisiteness within man and nature. Thar has two parts. The southern part is called Tharparkar. This part consists of Deeplo, Mithi, Umerkot, and Narodhor. While, other part is called White Desert.

The White Desert blooms like a white flower in a Nara region around a 23000 square kilometre area. It starts from the Cholistan Punjab, crosses Ghotki, Sukkur, Khairpur and Sanghar District. Further on it touches the India border. Achro Thar consists of many Talukas of Sindh, including Khipro, Sanghar, Thari Meer Vah,



THE VILLAGE: Thatched roofs of rural Sindh

parts. Especially, Nara canal and Makhi Lakes are at the center of cattle farming, cultivation and farming. We visited Makhi Lake which is surrounded by dense forest, greenery, sweet scented fresh-air and birds. It seemed dreamland. The real name of the lake was M-aa-khi (honey bee) because numerous bees were found in the forest. Makhi was the base of the famous Hur Tehreek. Apart from its historical perspective, Makhi Forest is rich enough to have a wild life area. Variety of animals has been found such as: bucks, hog deer, fox, hubara bustard and grey partridge.

Women also contributed economically to this area. In one village, I saw Ralli work.

age, its name is mentioned in the history of this region. Specially, in Sama region it was considered an important defensive centre during wars.

Other places that we visited, were Shiv Jo Mander and the near by forest. Here in the bazaar, I saw very special things, like unique embroidery, shawls, chunri and bangles. The cloth *bandhino* is a superb creation of White Desert. It is a very old form of chunri, available Black and Maroon colours. The jewellery has a special feature. It is simple but elegant. Specially, silver ornaments are worth mentioning.

I found it interesting to sit among women folk of white

artistically. Its roof is covered with *kip* (grass of Thar) tied up with rope. This wooden arch shape roof proves a good ventilator and remains cool in a hot season.

Apart from their colourful culture, people belong to White Desert, leading very difficult life. They are an ignored populace they are struggling hard to survive. There is no proper transport in various villages of White Desert such as: Chor, Maicore, Khipro, Somaraho. People, in case of an emergency, are unable to reach for medical help and most of them die. Due to merger sources, scarcity of rain, and dearth of basic facilities, they suffer extremely.

Sanghar, Thari Meer Vah, Naro, Faiz Ganjas, Rohri, Khangarh, Salih Pat, Dharki, Obaro and Mirpurmathelo.

This part is named Achoro Thar or White Desert due to white sand that is not mixed with clay; one that is dusky and light brown. This is less green part as compared to Tharparkar, which is the most fascinated of places. White Desert is yet undiscovered part. It is divided into four parts: Mohrano, Runjh, Drein and Centre.

Sanghar was the first place, where we stayed for few days. Every city has its own fragrance, temper and charm. I find this city calm, timid and poised. When the night falls, the wind sprayed slowly the mixed balm of various trees. The serene atmosphere mystifies its existence. Under the shadow of darkness, I enjoyed solitary long walks listening the soft music of leaves.

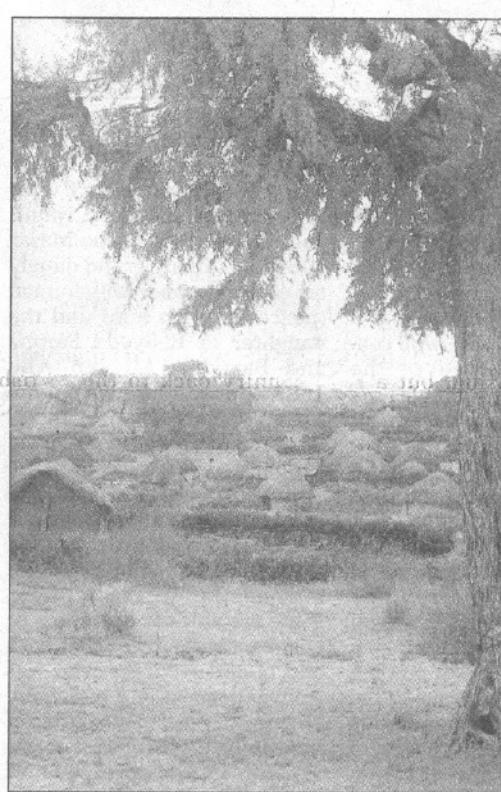
Next day, we visited the archaeological site Mansurah, situated in Sanjhor, District Sanghar. It was the centre of trade and culture. The name Al-Mansurah is derived from Nasr means victory, gained by Arabs in Sindh. There are different interpretations about the destruction of this ancient city. Some says it was destroyed in an earthquake. The change of the course of river or maybe an invasion caused its destruction. Rivers are found in abundance all round Sanghar District spreading water channels in its different

one village, I saw Ralli work. It is a unique colourful work; this special craft enriched the culture of Indus civilization. This art required a good aesthetic sense, especially, in the selection of colours and arrangements of these pieces of cloths in such a manner that it could form meticulously a marvellous pattern; the true expression of ancient folk wisdom. I saw various designs such as: Chand taro, Chow mukhi, Mati mandh, Khaji tari, etc. They have done new experiments and derived names from animals and nature such as: Duck, Star, Leaf of cotton plant, Aeroplane and Bhirmoti.

Catah pattern is always in high demand from the customers; this resembles applique or cut work; very familiar to the western woman.

The White Desert is faced with various problems. Paucity of rain, lakes of agriculture and due to meagre resources, people heavily depend on cattle breeding.

When we entered Khipro, it was shimmering like a silver ornament under the glossy rays of sun. The white silken sand was glittering, and on the fresh faces of wild flowers glisten with dewdrops. Dewy breeze floated with aroma of dense forest. In that silence, our ears captured the chirping of birds. It was immaculate and engrossing. We visited the ruins of Rato Kot. It is said that it was once a magnificent city. In Sooma, Sama and Turkhan



OASIS OR REALITY: Life thrives in Thar, dispelling common

desert. Their cloths, jewellery, marriage ceremonies, norms and wisdom are interesting. The people from White Desert are warm, vivacious and affectionate. They live in a perfect harmony as a family member in a joint family system. The kinship, closeness and importance of relationship are laudable. It is a matter of fact; these people live with perfect peace of mind. They are simple, true and spontaneous like natural objects. They live in *chanvro* special hut of Thar made

Malnutrition, contaminated water and unawareness are great cause of diseases among them. Tuberculosis, cancer and guinea problems are common.

The happiness and affluence sprawl in the clemency of heaven. When clouds hover over the sky, their barren souls enrapture. Peacocks open up feathers in euphoria. In empty eyes flicker the light of contentment. In mirth and merriment they rejoice the bounties of nature. But mostly, in

sert

the hard days of drought and dearth, they always looked forward. They need support, sympathy and consideration.

Water shortage is major problem in the different areas of White Desert. Available water is salty; wells of fresh water are being so far away. Mostly, villagers are helpless to drink that water. This is the reason they caught various ailments. They need mobile health centres, free treatment and basic information about health.

Progress in education is not satisfactory. Due to lack of staff, most of the schools are closed. They need more schools and staff like the other parts of Thar that is more advanced in the field of education.

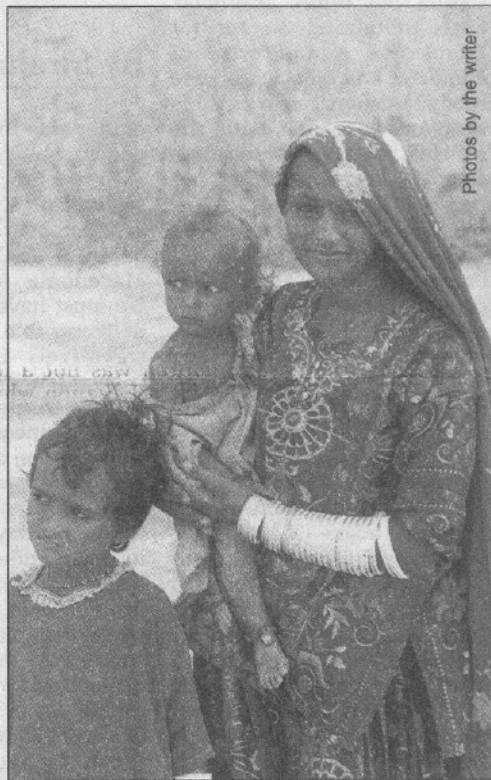
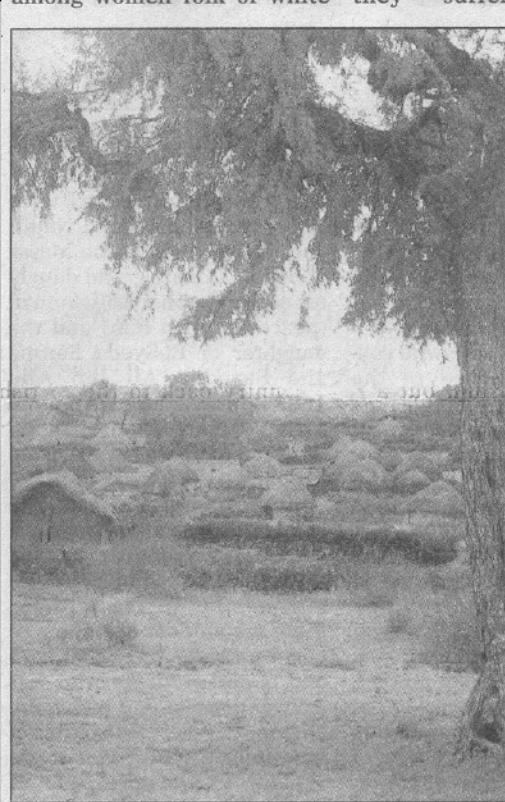
Our next destination was Hathoongo, where we watched an old pattern of cloth making called *Bandhino*. The women clad in their traditional dresses, were busy in tying the thousands tiny knots on the white cloth. After the dying process these knots will be opened and seem marvellous like stars. The process was hard and tiresome but women were happy with it. It was good source of earning for them.

White Desert is truly called paradise for hunters. Especially, tilore and deer are great cause of attraction to foreigners. Every year, Arab princes of various states proceed to the various parts of the White Desert; to satisfy their leisure pursuit. In full moon, the place dazzles the eyes with translucent beauty.

Finally, we reached



Photos by the writer



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OASIS OR REALITY: Life thrives in Thar, dispelling common misunderstandings

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Kakahoo Lake after a hazardous drive. This lake is situated a few miles away from Khipro. It was calm, serene and stunning beauty on earth. In the middle of desert, at sunset, on the smoothly moving waves the orange flare quiver. When sky merges with the waves, an ineffable harmonious moment grabs the soul. Surrounded by various bushes and trees, the soaked smell water of lake, mingled with trees fragrance carries a delightful message in the air. ■