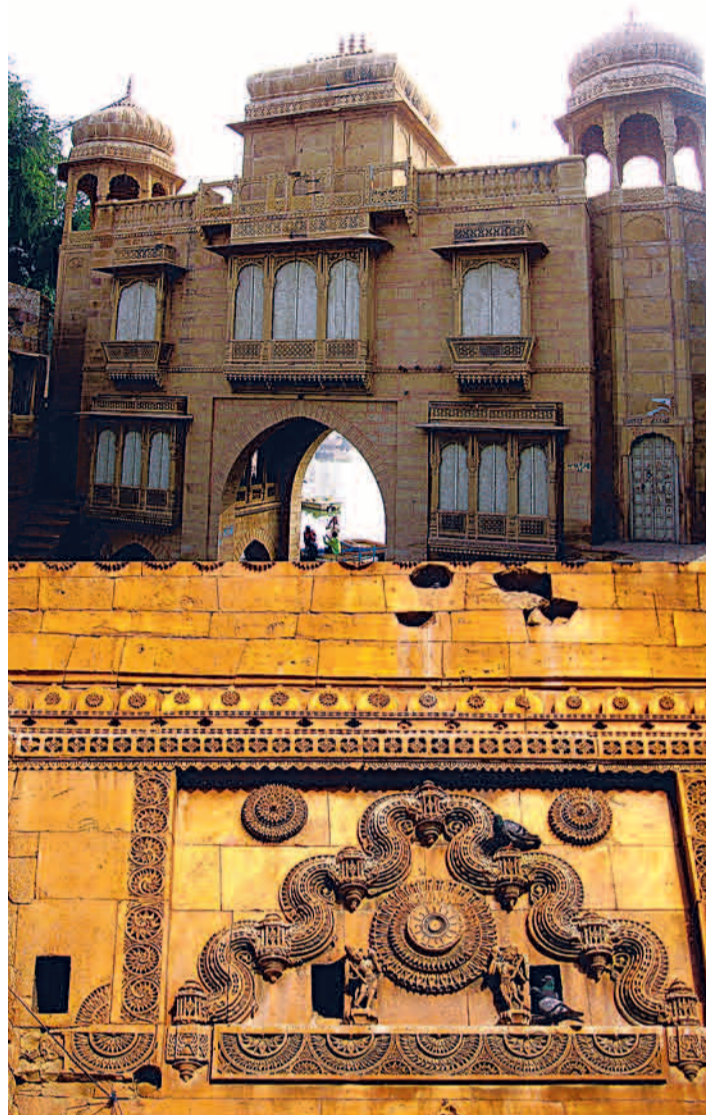


## Jaisalmer :

### Golden kingdom of sand & stone



By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

"Hello Mukul – how are you ? "

This is the most common sentence by which a small kid, if he is a boy, is welcomed at every hotel reception of Jaisalmer, the desert city of Rajasthan.

Mukul – the child character in Satyajit Ray's 1973 Bengali movie *Sonar Qella* has become a cult in Jaisalmer as the movie was shot here for several months and after the release of it an almost unknown town became one of the highest revenue earners for Rajasthan tourism. The movie captured its historical edifices and harsh geography in such a grand way that people from every corner of India, and specially from Bengal could never ignore Jaisalmer if they were touring Rajasthan. Almost overnight, from electricity to other civic amenities, all were blessed to Jaisalmer, where till now a sizeable population live inside of a 800 years old fort ! That is the magic of a movie directed by a maverick maestro named Ray.

Whether Satyajit Ray selected Jaisalmer or not for his movie, it was always an amazing place. History contains a testimony of its glory.

Thanks to the glorious saga of Bhatti Rajputs and rich traders of Marwar, the place bears a shining milestone of human survival and intellectual expression under the most harsh climate. Imagine a zone where no river flows and depth of average sweet water well is 25 ft. The sun in summer touches 50 degree with no plant on ground and no cloud on sky to cover people and animal. In this cruel desert, a race survived with its own archaeology and craftsmanship for more than 800 years. No doubt Jaisalmer is a signature of victory of human civilization.

Like all places of Rajasthan past of Jaisalmer is decorated with glory of bravery and shadow of compromise.

Way back in 1156 the city was founded by one Bhatti Rajput king named Raja Rawal Jaiwal and from him the city got its name. The exact meaning of Jaisalmer is "hill castle of Jaisal" that clearly indicates its existence as a fort city. For long it remained safe from the Islamic invaders mainly because of its tough access, but in 1294 when Bhatti Rajput looted caravans of booty of Ala-ud-din-Khilji going to Sind, it was first attacked and overtaken by muslims. Rajput girls observed "jauhar" by jumping in fire to save themselves from the disgrace of being looted at the hand of muslims. After that Rajputs got back the hang of their own power and kept peace with Mughals despite few fights with Humayun and Sha-Jahan.

Needless to say, meanwhile the place was flush with the taxes collected from the traders going to the spice route, and that pushed this desert city towards the corner of prosperity. A majestic fort, mind blowing *havelies* and handicrafts were the outcome of this inflow of cash.

Even now the city is identified with its 800 years old fort, a UNESCO world heritage site.

The fort made of honey gold yellow sandstone is the biggest land mark of Jaisalmer. This is a living fort where still a half of the town's population reside. The 800 years old fort houses 8 Jain and 4 Hindu temples, all with superfine craftsmanship on stone. Out of that,

Parswanath temple of 1417, Risavanath temple of 1479 and Shantinath temple also set up in 1479 are mind blowing pieces of sand stone architecture. All these temples are built in almost similar style of Dilwara temple of Mount Abu. However these are much smaller in sizes.

The wall of the fort runs 457 mt, 2nd longest in Rajasthan after Chittore.

Once there were 99 watch towers ensuring a tight security vigil of the place. Even now several towers and gates stand here like old sentinels of a bygone era. Ganesh pole is a plaza where people under death penalty were executed, while at Bhutapol, Rajput women used to sacrifice their lives in fire to protect their dignity. Among the palaces Gaj vilas and Badal vilas also known as tower of cloud are significant. Apart from that the Rajmahal or the royal palace that dons the central plaza of the walled fort is an outstanding piece of work.

Jaisalmer is often called the city of *havelies*. *Havelies* are the giant palaces extensively decorated with sand stone artwork and wall paintings. The arches, hanging windows with cenotaph, cornish, pillars, balcony and gates of *havelies* found here are so splendidly decorated that often people are amazed as to how a suppressed race living in this tough condition can express this level of artistic talent in such a way !

Among many such *havelies* the most famous and oldest is Patwonji *ki haveli* constructed in 1805. This royal residence built by a rich man named Guman Chand Patwa, is a 5th storied building with many rooms and huge open spaces. This *haveli* is basically an amalgamation of 5 *havelies* meant for five sons of Guman Chand who made his fortune in trading of gold and opium. This is the most photographed *haveli* of Rajasthan. Thanks to its proximity from the fort, it is always crowded with tourists. The *zafri* that is floral designed carved out of sandstone in this palace is just amazing.

Nathmalji *ki haveli* built in 1885 is considered as the best specimen of desert architecture. Built as the residence of powerful minister Diwan Mohota Nathmal, it was designed by two architect brothers, namely Hathi and Lulu. Their lack of coordination made a mess in the completion of the *haveli* and that gives the palace an odd look but this major weakness is forgotten in its eye catching grand craftsmanship of stone. Its elephant gate and windows are worth watching. There are plethora of paintings on the pillars and walls. Modern tools and machine like car and fans which were nowhere visible in Jaisalmer in those days were also illustrated only by hearing description from other people.

Salim Singhji *ki haveli* which was residence of former prime minister of the state and later bought by Meheta family is one of the finest. Built in year 1815 this *haveli* is a wonderful blending of Rajput and Islamic archaeology. It has 38 balconies with blazing artwork on stone and it looks like a ship. It was once taller than the royal palace of the king and for that it was partly demolished.

In this desert city, a huge lake, actually a sweet water reservoir built in 1367 is indeed an amazing find. The Gadsisar lake planned by Maharwal Gadsis Singh the ruler of this city in 14th century is a good example of welfare state where water crisis of the people was addressed in a modern way. The bank of this rain water

lake was later crowded with various temples and palaces which are still visible. This is a must visit place of Jaisalmer along with a 5th floor tower named Tazia tower. Stands at Badal *mahal* palace tower was built by a muslim designer and it is a marvel of Islamic style. It is nice to see how a Hindu kingdom allowed such an archaeological harmony breaking common path of hostility.

16 kms from Jaisalmer one can find the ruins of Lodurwa, the old capital of this kingdom. Another lake Amar Sagar, known as the oasis of this desert, is also 6 km from the city.

The great Indian desert which was once brilliantly captured by Satyajit Ray in his movie attracts people.

Thar the great Indian desert has 65% of its arid land mass in Rajasthan. The sun baked land with limited rainfall and least vegetation was once known as land of death. More than 180 million years ago the place was created when all its rivers dried up. Even now life is tough under the cruel Sun.

The desert can be reached from Jaisalmer in a jeep drive of 30 minutes and all kinds of amusement including camel safari, jeep safari, desert music, dance and food are available there. However the best part of this desert is its harsh and ruthless face. It has its own craft and own music which is distinctive and enriched. The sand dunes here are thrilling and the golden sand bed at twilight with a gray sky over it is just magical. After the sundown the sky turns pink and the sand still glows. It is the time when lamps are lit up in near by villages and another day of survival comes to an end for the people living here.

No visit is complete in Jaisalmer if desert is not visited and a thrilling camel ride is not taken and no lesson is wise enough if lesson of graceful survival under the most horrific nature is not learnt from this dusty golden city.

### Travel Logistics:

Jaisalmer is well connected by railways from Delhi and Jaipur. Regular buses are going to all over Rajasthan from here.

Nearest airport is Jodhpur which is 284 km away.

Desert safari is done from 4 pm - so be ready atleast an hour before. Your taxi or jeep will pick you up from your hotel if contacted in advance.

Jaisalmer fort is a living fort and a home for hundreds of people - so please respect their privacy. Do not take photograph of private houses and people if not allowed.

Handicrafts are biggest attraction for shopping - do not miss colorful Rajasthani canvas dolls - bargain hard.

Rajasthan Tourism is very helpful and has offices at many places.

Jaisalmer Govt Museum is a must visit place. Rajasthan tourism organises desert festival in January - February.

Useful website: [www.tourism.rajasthan.gov.in](http://www.tourism.rajasthan.gov.in)

PICS : : SOMEN SENGUPTA

