

The desert's daughters

Traversing through Rajasthan

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Lesley J Saunders



Living in the South of India, I was intrigued with the obvious change in cultures as I travelled throughout the different states. The noticeable difference in dress and mannerisms that I encountered was remarkable. From the trendy western garb of many businesswomen and men, to the style icons of the evening wearing cocktail attire, and the vibrantly colourful and adorningly styled saris worn by the women, especially in the villages. All these made for an astonishing framework for capturing the emotions, mannerisms and cultures through my camera lens. So, if this was just travelling the South of India, then what did the rest of India have to offer?

A trip through Rajasthan was an absolute 'must do' on my list. So, armed with my camera and a selection of lenses varying from 18 to 70mm, 28 to 300mm and 100 to 500mm, I set-off to capture the strength and emotions of the 'Real People of India'. By now, you may be aware from my previous columns, my main focus centres on the strength of the 'Real' Women of India, as exhibited at my shows. I was struck by the remarkable difference in the culture of the people of Rajasthan compared to the South. In all my encounters, the people were warm and welcoming, although in several villages, they were initially wary of my presence, as I was armed with a camera and zoom lens. My first encounter was with the street musicians and dancers working hard to entertain their small audience. The vibrant and vivid colours of their clothes mixed with their infectious smiles, lifted my spirits straightaway, although, the temperature was above 35 degrees (hot for a girl used to cold Britain!), the warmth I felt inside was indefinable.

It was important for me to mix my journey with the tourist spots of Rajasthan along with the remote and rural areas, so

that I could get a more complete picture of what this part of the world really had to offer. Visiting the 'Pink City' - Jaipur, was like entering into fairytale land! Beautiful and breathtaking, but in a way tranquil, although, hyper with the hustle and bustle of tourists coupled with local people going about their daily business. I was drawn towards the vendors selling their wares at markets and on the street corners. They were obviously experienced at dealing with tourists, offering them beaming and welcoming smiles. But I noticed, many showed their true emotions when they thought no one was looking. They seemed pensive, thoughtful, hungry for success, sad and tired. A crowd gathered around a young woman having her arm decorated with henna. Precision and passion oozed from the vendor as she created her design. What a result! What an artist. I was compelled to record this captivating moment with my camera.

Moving further into Rajasthan, I noticed subtle differences throughout every village and town I travelled through. All still, full of energy and the colourful attire becoming even more vivid at each stop. It was as if, each place was competing to show the most vibrantly adorned and dressed women. How interesting! The more colourful, the wider the smiles and joviality of these people. Decked in their jewellery, especially their ornate rings, the whole image of these women portrayed nothing less than glamour and pride, regardless of the challenges they faced. As I observed the groups of women laughing among themselves, often with children in their arms, one could not help but admire the multi-tasking of comforting the child and banter with their friends. Time seemed to be at a standstill.

Capturing these images became more difficult as I went to the more remote places. Why? The age old tradition in these parts, where the woman keeps her



1. Sheer Artistry! Ramgarh, Rajasthan. This little hamlet attracts a lot of tourists and the streets are a buzz with vendors selling all kinds of wares and trinkets. A small crowd gathered around to savour the intricate design this 'henna' artist was creating. I was in awe with the speed and dexterity with which she was working on her subject. And what perfection! I resisted the temptation of putting my arm out. I needed both to capture this incredible moment!

2. Wholesome Foursome Rajasthan. The brisk walk of these women was purposeful. What was their destination? Their colourful attire, the banter, the smiles, the mischievous looks convinced me they were out to have a good time. It did bring back some memories of my younger days. Life can be fun if one chooses to make it so.

3. Sheer Contentment! Mandawa, Rajasthan: This young woman's disarming smile fascinated me. Her eyes appeared to be smiling too. She evidently had learnt to be happy with her lot, her karma. One of my very few subjects that actually posed for me. She convinced me that life can be good if you choose to see it that way.

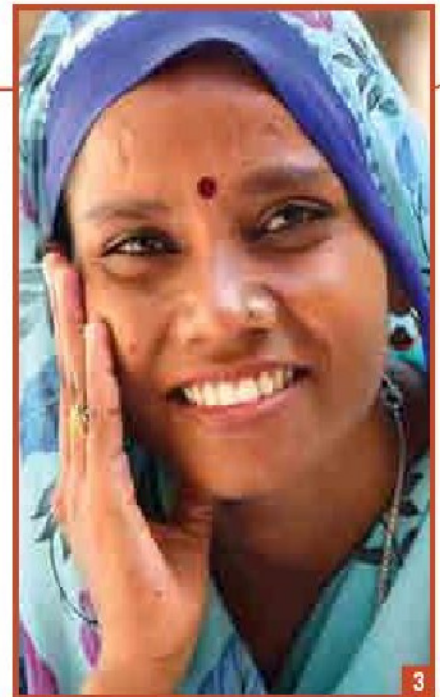


face covered for the majority of the time masked the emotions that I had so often photographed. So, patience was certainly the essence for this trip.

I encountered a group of women in a remote village, carrying their water pots, having been to collect drinking water. The high afternoon sun shone brightly on them. Though, this was happening in the distance, I was able to encapsulate the vision by using my zoom lens and concentrating on the mirror image shining clearly on the steel pots.

The gaiety of the group of four women who looked as if they were on an outing changed to coy when they saw me, but even so, they could not hide their laughter and sparkle, it was like taking a photograph of a sea of colour with playful waves.

India is certainly a diverse country that makes it all the more intriguing. The people fascinate me. The different cultures, languages, dress ethics awash with vibrant colours in one region, to subtle in another. What India has to



offer among many riches has to be a limitless variety that any truly, passionate photographers desire for.

You can read more about my perceptions and experiences, and why I choose to capture the images that I do in my travels, in future editions of *Asian Photography*. Please visit my website www.elleje.com to see more of my portrayals and to know more about ROKO Cancer.

Happy Clicking!

—Lesley J Saunders