

Geographical Setting of Rajasthan-The Desert Land of India

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Abstract

Regional geography is the study of the distinct features of locations as they relate to their culture, economics, terrain, climate, politics, and natural variables such as flora and wildlife. It also investigates the particular boundaries between locations. Geography can help us comprehend the movement, changes, and systems of the globe. In this paper, an attempt has been made to explore the physical features of Rajasthan. Furthermore, our study tries to examine how the present state of Rajasthan was formed.

Keywords: Rajasthan, Suba Ajmer, Princely States, Plains and Hilly Region, Aravalli, Vegetation, Desert.

Rajasthan is the largest state of India in terms of area and it stands at number seven from a population point of view. Rajasthan is situated in the north-western part of India between 23°3'N and 30°12'N latitudes and 69°30'E and 78°17'E longitudes.¹ It covers an area of about 342, 274 sq. km.² Presently, it is comprised of thirty-three districts with Jaipur as the capital and largest city in terms of area. On the east, it is bounded by Uttar Pradesh, on the south by Gujrat, on the south-east by Madhya Pradesh, on the west by Pakistan and on the north by Punjab and on the north-east by Haryana (see Map 1).³ Different terms were applied to Rajasthan like *Rayathana* and *Rajwada*⁴ during medieval times.⁵ *Rajputana* or *Rajpootana* was used by George Thomas, an Irish soldier who later became the ruler of the Hissar region in Haryana.⁶

James Tod, an officer of the British East India Company, was the pioneer in employing the term 'Rajasthan' for the title of his celebrated book, i.e., *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan*.⁷ In the sixteenth century, it was known as Suba Ajmer which was bounded by the Mughal provinces of Delhi in the north, Agra in the east, Malwa in the south-east, Gujrat in the south and Multan and Sindh in the west respectively.⁸ Suba Ajmer was comprised of various principalities like Marwar, Amber, Bikaner, Mewar, Jaisalmer, Kota, Sirohi and Bundi.⁹ There were other regions like Gagraon, Bayana, Alwar, Dholpur, Tijara, Hindaun and Todabhim which were parts of other *subas* but later incorporated into Rajasthan.¹⁰ For instance, Gagraon was part of suba Malwa while Hindaun, Bayana, Dholpur, Alwar, Tijara and Todabhim belonged to *suba* Agra.¹¹

Rajasthan consisted of around nineteen princely states before the amalgamation of the said states into the Union of India. Jodhpur, Jaipur, Bikaner, and Jaisalmer like bigger princely states were merged with the state of Rajasthan on March 30, 1949. The people of Rajasthan celebrate March 30 as 'Rajasthan Diwas', the day when their state came into existence. Among the princely states, Bikaner was the first to willingly accede to joining the Union of India. The princely states of old Rajasthan or Rajputana were

merged with the Union of India on November 1, 1956; hence, the present state of Rajasthan was officially created.

Rajasthan can be divided into two different geographical regions viz: the plains and the hilly regions. The plains lying between $24^{\circ}30'$ and $30^{\circ}12'N$ and $69^{\circ}15'$ and $76^{\circ}45'E$, comprise *Marushthali* or the eastern part of the *Thar* and the adjoining Bagar or steppe land to the west of the Aravalli's extending over the western districts of Rajasthan (Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jalor, Nagaur and Pali) along with the northern and eastern parts (Bikaner, Churu, Ganganagar, Jhunjhunu and Sikar). An area of 196,747 sq. km. is covered by it.¹² The principal geographical feature of Rajasthan is the old Aravalli range (the oldest mountain range in India as observed by geologists) which extends from Champaner (Gujrat) in a north-easterly direction up to near Delhi, covering 692 km.¹³ In Rajputana, it runs from Khetri near Jaipur in the north-west to Khed Brahma in the south-west about 550 km.¹⁴ Guru Shikhar near Mount Abu with a height of 1722 meters is the highest point of the Aravalli range. As this range reaches Delhi, it gets tapered and is more prominent towards its south-east end with peaks like Kho, Raghunathgarh, Babi and Taragarh.¹⁵ Beyond the region of Mewar, it has a width of about 50 km. And spread out in the regions of Dungarpur and Udaipur.¹⁶ So, it is believed that this range played a vital role in the thick defense of the Mewar kingdom from foreign invasions during the medieval period. It divides the province into two natural parts, i.e., the north-west and south-east of the Aravalli. Around three-fifths of Rajasthan lies north-west of this range and comprises chiefly desert and semi-desert. Having an extension of about 60,000 sq. miles, it is covered by the former states of Bikaner, Jaisalmer, major parts of Jodhpur and a portion of Jaipur.¹⁷ This region is dry, ill-watered, and less productive, as far as agriculture is concerned. The south-eastern part comprises modern districts like Dungarpur, Udaipur, Banswara, Bhilwara, Kota, Bundi and Jhalawar¹⁸. This part is hilly, finely watered, more wooded, and good for agriculture.¹⁹ Aravalli's western and southern portions get drained by rivers and their tributaries. Luni, being the chief river rises in the Aravalli range and flows in the south-west direction. Finally, it is lost in the Rann of Kutch.²⁰ Luni and its tributaries which mostly rise in the Aravalli hills, are not perennial. The area through which various rivers run and the streams that join the Luni are discussed in detail by Nainsi.²¹ The union of two rivers, Sukri and Gilari/Guhiya at Sojhat supports a small fertile tract.²²

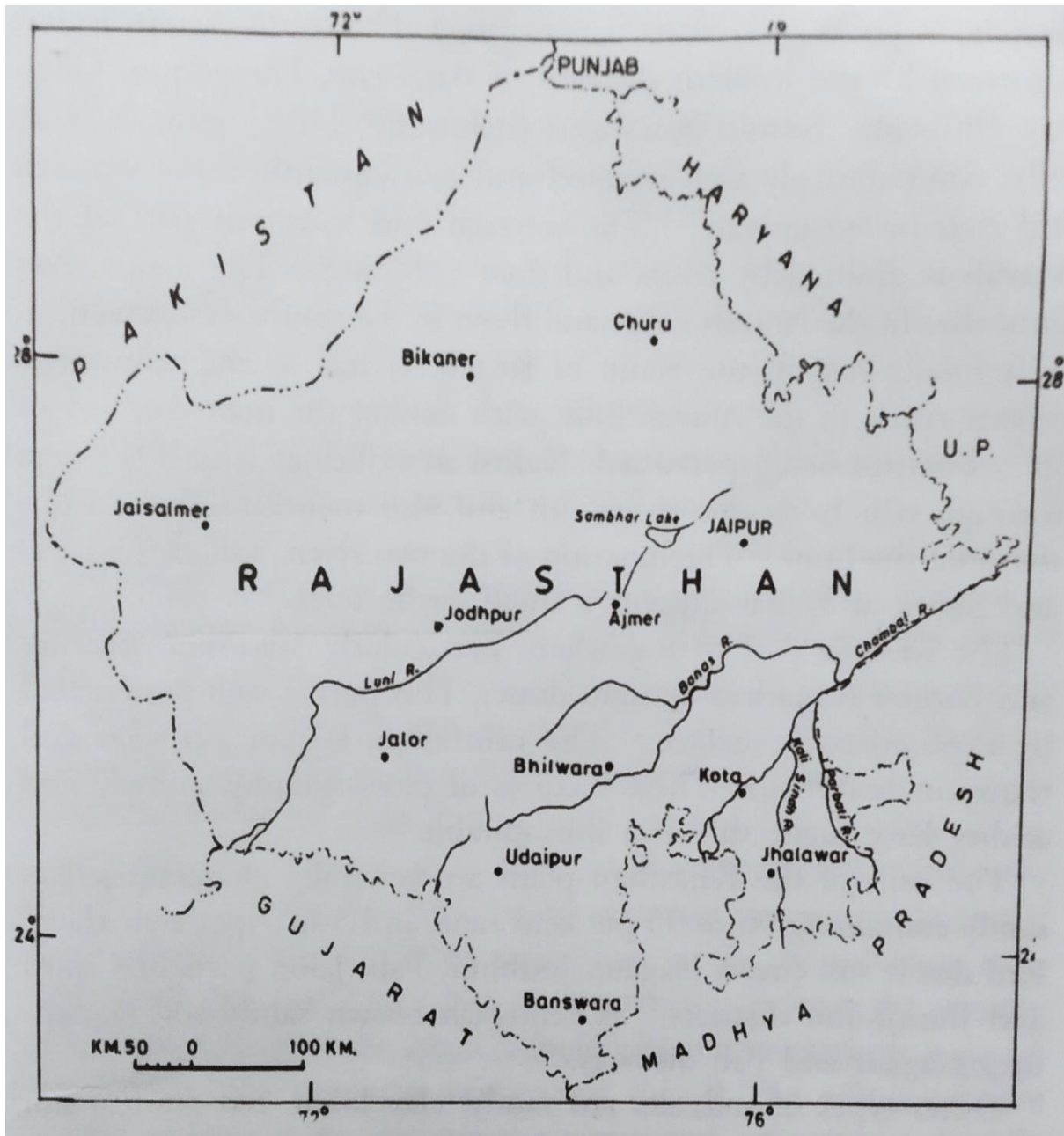
The western portion of Rajasthan especially Jaisalmer, Bikaner and Barmer is marked by sand dunes and is well punctuated by exposed rock surfaces.²³ The rainfall is 10 cm per year and transport is hard and difficult. So, these features of physiography, climate and aridity have made this portion inhospitable. So far as the soils of the Rajasthan plain are concerned, they are generally characterized as sandy having 90 to 95 percent sand and 5 to 7 percent clay respectively.²⁴ Jodhpur, Pali, Nagaur, Jalor, Jhunjhunu, and portions of Churu are covered by red desert soil.²⁵ Towards the east and north-east, the fertility of red desert soil increases and ground water is found at a depth of 30 to 122 metres.²⁶ So, in these areas, some agricultural production is possible. Due to the presence of nitrate, the soil quality is improved²⁷. Yellowish brown sandy soil is found in the districts of Pali and Nagaur.²⁸ Red and yellow soils are found in the west portion of the districts of Udaipur, Ajmer and Bhilwara. A good moisture holding capacity is found in this soil. The soil being sandy, has a clay content of 3 to 9 percent.²⁹ Medium Black soil is most commonly found in the districts of Jhalawar, Kota and Bundi.³⁰ The north-eastern portion of the state consisting of the districts of Jaipur, Alwar, Bharatpur, Sawai Madhopur and central part of Ganganagar district is covered by alluvial soil.³¹ It is generally found to be red coloured and

deficient in lime, phosphoric acid and humus.³² A wide variety of crops like cotton, tobacco, rice and wheat are produced on this soil.³³

Rajasthan has a wide variety of natural vegetation which ranges from scanty vegetation (in the Thar region) to mixed deciduous and sub-tropical evergreen forests (in the east and south-east of the Aravalli hills). In the west portion of Rajasthan, varieties of babul trees like *acacia arabica*, *acacia senegal* and *prosopis juliflora* are found along with *prospis spicigera* locally known as *khejri*. In the driest part of the state, varieties of grass like *eleonurus hirsutus* and *pacium* are found. Teak forests cover an area of about 5,200 sq. km. In parts of Udaipur and Chittorgarh, the most common tree found is teak which provides timber used for making furniture, doors, windows, etc. Bamboo is also found in the interior of these forests. The mixed deciduous forests are commonly found in Kota, Bundi, Udaipur and Chittorgarh and spread over 9065 sq. km. The wood provided by these forests is used for timber, fuel, and charcoal. In the areas of Jodhpur, Ajmer and Jaipur, tropical thorn forests are found whose heights vary from 4.5 to 6 metres. Similarly, the sub-tropical evergreen forests cover 52 sq. km around the Mount Abu area. *Magnifera indica* (mango) and *sizygium cuminic* (blackberry/*jamun*) are common trees found here.

So far as the economy of Rajasthan is concerned, it is chiefly dependent on agriculture. In the eastern part, different crops are grown like maize, wheat, cotton, oilseeds, sugarcane, etc. In the western part of the state (the arid and semi-arid regions) where cultivable area is just 9.1 percent of the total area in districts like Jaisalmer and Bikaner, crops like millets, bajra and some pulses are grown. In the north, the huge production of wheat (based on irrigation) is found in Ganganagar and in the eastern and south-eastern parts of the state near the Luni basin. Maize production constitutes 4.6 percent of the total cropped area. It is grown (in the month of April-May with the help of irrigation) around the Aravalli range and Banas basin covered by the districts of Bhilwara, Banswara, Udaipur, Dungarpur, Ajmer and Chittorgarh. Of the total crop production, 4 percent is constituted by barley. The leading producers of barley are, Udaipur, Bhilwara, Ajmer, Jaipur, Tonk, Ganganagar, Pali, Sawai Madhopura, Bharatpur, Sikar and Alwar. The most important crop in Rajasthan is bajra which constitutes about 30.08 percent of the total produce. It can be grown in poor soil conditions with low rainfall. So, 75 percent of bajra is found in the western part of the state like Jodhpur, Barmer, Jaisalmer, Bikaner, Nagaur and Ganganagar. Production of jawar is found in Jodhpur, Nagaur, Pali, Ajmer and Tonk. Gram, the second highest produced crop in Rajasthan is grown in the north-eastern part of the state covered by districts like Churu, Alwar, Jhunjhunu, Bharatpur, Tonk, Jaipur, Ajmer and Sawai Madhopur. Pulses are also grown and their great concentration is found in semi-arid regions like Bikaner, Jodhpur, Nagaur and Churu. Sesame is produced in the districts of Jalor, Pali, Jaipur, Banswara, Sirohi, Nagaur, Ajmer, Sawai Madhopur, Bhilwara, Chittorgarh, Udaipur, Bharatpur and Jhalawar. Similarly, cotton is produced in Ganganagar and south-eastern districts like Jhalawar, Ajmer, Bhilwara, Udaipur and Chittorgarh.

The western arid and semi-arid parts of Rajasthan are significant for their livestock production. This sector provides subsidiary occupations to the inhabitants of the desert especially the nomadic tribes whose livelihoods depend on livestock.³⁴



Map 1: An Outline Map of Rajasthan (drawn by Mr. Faiz Habib).³⁵

NOTES AND REFERENCES

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3. K.C. Jain, *Ancient Cities and Towns of Rajasthan*, Motilal Banarasidas, Delhi, 1972, pp. 19-20.
4. The term *Rajwada* refers to the abode of the Rajas. B.L. Gupta, *Trade and Commerce in Rajasthan*, Jaipur Publishing House, Jaipur, 1987, p. 1.
5. V.C. Mishra, *Geography of Rajasthan*, p. 2.
6. George Thomas, as a ruler of Hissar, marched upon the kingdoms of Jaipur, Udaipur, and the Bikaner regions of Rajasthan. His biographer named William Franklin, recorded all his experiences in the book titled "*Military Memoirs of Mr. George Thomas*", John Stockdale Pub., London, 1805. The political scenario of Rajasthan, its geographical conditions, agricultural production, trading activities, etc., have been discussed in this work.
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33. V.C. Mishra, *Geography of Rajasthan*, p. 63.
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35. Mr. Faiz Habib is the seniormost cartographer at C.A.S., Department of History, A.M.U., Aligarh.