

Steps to Water: Stepwells in India

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Steps to water or the stepwells in India are pretty amazing structures not found anywhere else in the world. They are one of the most unique and very little known parts of the Indian architecture, especially the beautifully carved walls of these subterranean water sources. Stepwells are basically deep dug trenches or rock-cut wells or ponds of water reached by a winding set of stairs or steps and are variously known as 'bawdi', 'baoli', 'vav', 'vavdi', 'vai', 'kalyani', or 'pushkarni'. The Sanskrit *Silpa-Shastras* and ancient inscriptions refer to them as 'Vapi' or 'Vapika'.

The western India has a hot and semi- arid climate and capricious rainfall. Therefore, it always had to collect the water of the monsoon rains and keep it accessible for the remaining dry months of the year. That is how the stepwells came into being. For centuries they remained an integral part of the western Indian communities as sites for drinking, washing, and bathing, as well as for colorful festivals and sacred rituals. They also served as cool sanctuaries for caravans, pilgrims, and common travellers during the heat of the day or for an overnight stay. But these magnificent structures were much more than utilitarian reservoirs. Stepwells usually consist of two parts: a vertical shaft—protected from direct sunlight by a full or partial roof—from which the water is drawn and the surrounding inclined subterranean passageway, chambers and steps which provide access to the well. It is the lattice-like walls, intricately carved columns, decorated towers in this surrounding area that has made them exceptionally rich monument of Indian architecture. Commissioned by royal, wealthy, or powerful patrons, they are complex engineering feats and stunning examples of both Indian and Islamic architecture.

The first rock-cut stepwells in India appeared between 2nd and 4th centuries A.D. Next took place the construction of wells at Dhank, near Rajkot, Gujarat (550-625 A.D.) and of the stepped ponds at Bhinmal, in the Jalore district of Rajasthan (850-950 A.D.). After that the construction of stepwells is known to have gone on vigorously fast spreading from the south western region of Gujarat to the north of Rajasthan, along the western border of the country, where several thousands of these wells were built during that period. This activity virtually, hit its peak from the 11th to 16th century. Most existing stepwells today date from the last eight hundred years. There are suggestions that they

might have originated much earlier. Following the reported discovery of as many as 700 wells in just one section of the city of Mohenjo-daro the scholars are led to believe that these 'cylindrical brick-lined wells' might have been invented by the people of the Indus Valley Civilisation and may be the predecessors of the stepwell.

Scholars have estimated that by the 19th century several thousand stepwells in varying degrees of grandeur had been built throughout India—in the cities, villages, and eventually in private gardens where they came to be known as “retreat wells” because the travelers and pilgrims could park their animals and take shelter in covered arcades around these wells. It was considered extremely meritorious to commission a stepwell, as an act of plain philanthropy or as a memorial to a dear one.

Stepwells are categorized by their scale, layout, materials, and shape: they can be rectangular, circular, or even L-shaped; they can be built from masonry, rubble, or brick; and they can have as many as four separate entrances. No two stepwells are identical, and each—whether it is simple and utilitarian or complex and ornamented—has a unique character. Much depends on where, when, and by whom they were commissioned. All of them have strikingly beautiful architecture. Some of the more significant ones are:



The front view of the Chand Baori

(Credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AAbaneri-Chand_Baori_PN-20131018.jpg)

Chand Baori at Abhaner

Chand Baori is the famous and most attractive stepwell found in the village of Abhaneri, near Jaipur, Rajasthan. It is the deepest, and one of the oldest step wells in the world. It was built by King Chand of the Nikumbh dynasty between 800 and 900 AD and is located opposite the temple of Harshat Mata, the goddess of joy and happiness to whom it was eventually dedicated on completion. With 3500 narrow steps and 13 stories it is one of the largest stepwells in India and a fine example of architectural excellence prevalent in the past. Two breath-taking views:



Spectacular sight of the winding stairs at the Chand Baori

(Credit: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AChandBaori.jpg>)

The town of Bundi, also in Rajasthan has come to be known as the “City of stepwells” on account of the large number of stepwells found there. The impressive architecture of its *baoris* (stepwells) matches perfectly the architectural splendour of its forts, palaces, and miniature paintings. An official survey states that there are over 387 such *baoris* all over the district, the best among them is **Raniji ki baori** built by Rani Nathawati, the queen of Rao Raja Aniruddha Singh Hada, in 1600 A.D. It compares well with **Rani ka vav** (Queen’s stepwell) located in Patan, Gujarat. Though not as large, it has excellent carvings of Gajraj, with its trunk turned inwards giving the impression of having just drunk from the *baori*. The delicately chiselled arches on the columns add to the beauty and grandeur of the total structure.

The **Rani-ki-Vav** or “the Queen’s stepwell” in Patan, once the capital of Gujarat, is arguably one of the foremost wonders of India. Commissioned by Rani Udayamati as a memorial to her King Bhimsen I of the Solanki dynasty was built in 1063 AD. The stepwell has an intricate architectural design, and is considered one of the most beautiful

examples of subterranean construction. Despite having been flooded and buried underneath the rocks and earth for hundreds of years, the structure is still standing and is in relatively good shape. It is about 64 metres long, 20 metres wide and 27 metres deep, and originally had seven stories of which five are still preserved.



The incredible artistry on its panels

(Credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ARani_ki_vav_03.jpg)



Closer look at the statues

(https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3ARani_ki_vav_07.jpg)

Rani-ki-Vav is a highly decorated monument with ornamented panels of sculptures and reliefs representing the height of *Maru-Gurjara* style of architecture. Most of the sculptures are in devotion of *Vishnu*, in the forms of *Dashavatar*, with eye-catching images of *Varaha*, *Narasimha*, *Rama* and *Kalki*. There is a particularly beautiful statue of *Mahishasur-Mardini* -the Mother Goddess slaying the demon *Mahishasur*. Another highlight is, the *Apsaras* (the celestial beauties) showcasing sixteen different styles of makeup (*Solah Singar*). Near the water level, you come to a carving of *Sheshashayi Vishnu*, in which the lord reclines on the thousand-hooded serpent *Shesha*.

Till 2001, the visitors could go right up to the end of the stepwell touching the water. But after the Bhuj earthquake the ASI has prohibited entry beyond a point. This decision, however, in no way hinders viewing the delicate works that depict rhythm, beauty and various moods, all in stone.

And in the end a Camphor spirit as represented by a bathing maiden. Camphor (kapoor) is traditionally burnt in religious ceremonies. Note the bird drinking water falling from the hair of the maiden:

In June 2014, the Rani-ki-vav along with the Great Himalayan National Park was marked as a World Heritage site by the United Nations' Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).



A view of Adalaj Vav

(Credit: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AAdalaj_Vav_%282%29_Ahmedabad.JPG)

Another noteworthy stepwell, also in Gujarat, is the famous **Adalaj Vav**. Located in the village Adalaj in the district of Gandhinagar near Ahmedabad the Adalaj vav is one of the few wells with a richly documented history- featuring the tragic love story of its creation carved on a wall inside the structure in Sanskrit and Pali. The story goes that in

1499 A.D. the area then known as Dandai Desh was brutally sacked and the ruler killed, leaving behind a beautiful young queen. The conquering king, a neighboring Muslim ruler named Mohammed Begda, fell in love with the bereaved queen, who demanded that he complete the construction of the stepwell her husband had started if he wanted her hand in marriage. He agreed and set to work building the most beautiful well, five stories deep, adding intricate carvings of leaves, flowers, fish, and animals in a blend of Islamic architecture and Hindu symbolism. When the well was complete except for the crowning dome Begda presented his work and asked the queen to honour her word. She inspected his work, walked around the well, said a prayer and threw herself into the depths. Nearby are the graves of six masons who worked on the construction. Legend holds that when the stone carvers were asked by their proud patron whether they might be able to build another well so beautiful, their answer of “yes” sealed their fate.

Stepwells, besides a source of water, were also places to socialize and gather for religious ceremonies. They functioned virtually as subterranean temples, abounding in carved images of the male and female deities. Most of these images are those of Vishnu and Shiva in their various aspects such as Sridhar (i.e. Vishnu, the bearer of Sri or wealth), Jalasayin (Vishnu reclining on Anant Nag), Varaha (the third incarnation of Vishnu as the boar) et al. These sculptures formed a spiritual backdrop for ritual bathing, prayers, and offerings. Even today, despite lack of accessible groundwater, a number of stepwells continue as active temples—namely, the 11th-century Mata Bhavani Vav in Ahmedabad. Besides the icons from the Hindu pantheon the stepwell architecture is equally rich in secular images like that of *maithun* (erotic love), butter-churning, fighting or acrobatics, fighting horses and elephants, or ornate friezes and panels with floral motifs. Third kind of sculpture found in the stepwell architecture is the one produced under Jain influence. This sculpture depicts scenes from Jain mythology like a Tirthankara congregation.

Patronage influence on the stepwells is visible not only in their architectural decoration but also in their structural designing. Constructions about 12th century under Muslim domination clearly marks this shift. Whereas the Hindu builders used post-and-lintel construction with corbel domes, Muslims introduced the arch and the “true” dome. Hindu artists carved sculptures and friezes packed with deities, humans, and animals, but Islam completely forbade depictions of any human figure. Interestingly, a pair of brilliant stepwells— the Rudabai Vav and the Dada Harir Vav –a sort of conceptual cousins emerged in Gujarat around 1500 AD when the two traditions collided for a brief period. Both were commissioned by female patrons, and were built under Islamic authority using Hindu artisans. Each one is elaborately decorated but with a noticeable absence of deities and human figures.

A millennium ago, stepwells were fundamental to life. Most wells were built by the regions’ rulers as acts of benevolence for the community. Down the centuries, thousands of wells were constructed throughout northwestern India, but the majority have now fallen into disuse; many are derelict and dry, as groundwater has been diverted for industrial use and the wells no longer reach the water table. However, some important sites in Gujarat have recently undergone major restoration. There is a concerted effort to raise awareness of stepwells as masterpieces of architecture and engineering.

It's hard to imagine an entire category of architecture slip off history's grid, yet that seems to be the case with these disappearing marvels. We hope our country's burgeoning water crisis leads to redeem at least some of these subterranean edifices –and their priceless architecture before they disappear for all time to come.

Sharad Chandra has been contributing to *Rencontre avec L' Inde* since 1988. She is a freelance literary journalist, book reviewer, and author. Her publications include several monographs on Albert Camus, latest being *Albert Camus et L' Inde* (Editions Indigene, Montpellier), short fiction, and poetry.
