

The Stepwells of Gujarat tell the tales of women, water and life

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View of the Vav from above |

Most often, historical monuments tell us the stories of men, power and war. The Stepwells of Gujarat offer a refreshing alternative to this paradigm for they tell the tales of women, water and life, writes Mallika Iyer

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Stepwells (known as vavs) are a familiar feature in the landscape of Gujarat. They differ from ordinary wells in that they have steps leading down from the ground to the water-level. Water is not drawn by rope but by descending the steps of the multi-storied structure. But most of all, unlike ordinary wells, they are a world unto themselves and a revelation for a visitor.

Water and Women

Water, being a basic need, has often been venerated for its life-giving properties. The act of providing water is associated with earning merit. More so, in a land with scanty rainfall and an arid landscape, building a well was seen as an act deserving great merit. In this context, water also came to bear a close association with fertility as it was responsible for the growth of crops and cattle.

Women too have a deep association with water for somehow, the duty of collecting water has over the centuries been relegated to them. Even today, women and girls often spend hours each day, walking to and collecting water.

Stepwells were the spaces where the world of women and water converged. It was a space that women could visit freely, not just to collect water but also for socialising and recreation. Secluded below the surface and away from the male gaze, women could gather and be themselves. Friends could meet and chat. Girls could sing and dance. Inhibitions could melt away.



Perhaps in the modern age, serviced with piped water and water pumps, it is difficult to understand their significance, but during medieval times, these wells were a great blessing for people, particularly for women. “*Stepwells are a window into the lives of ordinary women. One can imagine the kind of lives they led, the deities they worshipped, the beliefs they held by observing the architecture of these vavs,*” explains Shilpa Chedda, visiting faculty at Mumbai University and curator at Heras Centre of St Xavier’s College, Mumbai.

It comes as no surprise therefore that more than a fifth of these wells were commissioned by women. From queens to wives of rich merchants, courtesans to servant girls – women had a large role to play in the construction of stepwells in Gujarat.

The Queen’s Stepwell

One of the most spectacular of these wells is the *Rani ni vav* or the Queen’s Well in Patan, which has been granted the status of an UNESCO World Heritage site for its sheer beauty and grandeur. It is said to have been built by Queen Udaimati, wife of Raja Bhima Dev in the 11th century AD and is the most ornately decorated well in the world.

Profusely carved and sculpted, images of 200 *apsaras* or celestial nymphs abound on its walls. As one descends its steps, one can see *Anjana* adorning her eyes with kohl and *Nupura*, slipping on an anklet. The *Darpana-Sundari* admires her reflection in the mirror as the *Karna-Sundari* puts on her earrings. The *Kapura-sundari* dries her long-flowing hair even as the *Aalas-Kanya* lazily stretches her curvaceous body. Each of these sculptures has been carved to perfection, revealing a high level of aesthetic and artistic skill of the craftsman.



Images of *kirtimukhas* are found on the steps to ward off the evil eye along with the *kshetrapala* or the guardian deity who protects the well. Latikas (creepers) add a decorative element while the geometric shapes of the patolagive it a distinctly local feel. Shaded pavilions offer a weary traveller a place to rest, away from the scorching rays of the sun.

Gods and goddesses, demi gods and deities, water nymphs and celestial musicians – they all make a striking appearance as one descends the steps. In the centre, Vishnu reclines in his Shesha-naag position after having sustained and provided for the world.

While there are many step wells in Gujarat, the Rani-ni-Vav is noteworthy for its intricate sculpture-work and deserves to be included in any travel itinerary to the state. (The only travel tip is to avoid wearing yellow, for the colour seems to be a magnet for local insects).



Stepwell Construction

The Adalaj-ni-vav on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, also sees a large footfall every year. Not as ornately carved as Rani ni vav, it is nevertheless a unique site. Another smaller yet beautifully

Ornately carved as Kani ni Vav, it is nevertheless a unique site. Another smaller yet beautifully carved well is the Dada Hari-ni-vav within the city of Ahmedabad. The temple tank of Modhera Sun Temple, though not strictly a step well, offers a spectacular visual in the geometric patterns of its steps. Across Gujarat, there are dozens of stepwells, built to honour local deities such as Bhavani, Sindhvai, Bhadrakali and Sitala, a large number of them constructed during the reign of the Solankis (922-1255 CE).

Credit for the perfection in the architecture and sculpture of these wells goes to the Somparas i.e. the hereditary craftsmen /masons who worked according to the canonical texts of construction namely the Shilpa Shastras and the Vapi Shilpa Shastra in particular, a text dealing specifically with the construction of stepwells. The wells that were constructed during the Islamic period, contain geometric designs and motifs, in line with Islamic and Persian influences.



Moved by their beauty, Sir John Marshall, the Director of the Archaeological Survey of India once said, *"There are no other wells in the world that structurally and decoratively can compare with these stepwells of Western India, and it was because their builders were content to keep the established traditions of the country that they were able to attain such perfection."*

Seldom are historical monuments testimonies to a perfect union of Functional Utility and Aesthetic Beauty. Until one stumbles upon the spectacular Stepwells of Gujarat.

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