

Stepwells: Understanding Their Growing Impact on Contemporary Arts and Practices in India

Tejaswi Mehta

Abstract— There is a growing interest in the heritage sector, for the stepwells' tangible and intangible concepts in the contemporary arts. There are quite a few tangible and intangible heritage that have been cultivated and adapted into the arts and one of which is the stepwells. Stepwells were primarily built for the utilitarian purpose of collecting and harvesting rainwater. They were structures that served to provide water to arid regions in India, primarily Gujarat and Rajasthan. With time their religious popularity increased and hence their architectural features became aesthetically elaborate and spiritual. This paper will address their genesis and influence on arts and consequently on their current status as 'more than just a religious totem'.

Index Terms—stepwells; contemporary arts; heritage management; groundwater; architecture; archaeology; Gujarat; Baori; pilgrimages.

Introduction

'Heritage is, after all, about interpreting history for the future and re-reading our past through our contemporary values' (Olson & Strebe, 2018). This statement ties in with the current views that the arts community has today. There is a growing interest in the heritage sector, for both its tangible and intangible concepts in the contemporary arts. There are quite a few tangible and intangible heritage that have been cultivated and adapted into the arts and one of which is the stepwells. Stepwells were built for the utilitarian purpose of collecting and harvesting rainwater. They were structures that served to provide water to arid regions in India, primarily Gujarat and Rajasthan. With time their popularity increased and hence their architectural features became more elaborate.

What are Stepwells?

Stepwells are subterranean architectures constructed between the 5th to the 19th century and were spread throughout India, but primarily in water-scarce regions of Gujarat and Rajasthan. They were made of three main parts, the well or *Kupa*, the stepped corridor leading to the well and the pavilion towers or *kutas*. A typical stepwell is several storeys deep to tap into the groundwater reserves, and they have intricate lattice-work on walls, carved columns, decorated towers, and symbolic sculpture work. Overall, their architectural features are an exceptional example of India's artistic grandeur.

The stepwells have been an integral part of Indian cultural heritage for centuries now and they are the best sources to study and understand the region's ecology, history and cultural values. The structures that were built as sites for drinking, washing and bathing, soon became meeting grounds for celebrating festivals and conducting sacred rituals. Their communal value led to the patrons designing even more elaborate structures replete with motifs, religious symbolism, pilasters, and cornices. Stepwells even acted as way-stations for weary travellers who lodged in the cool shade provided by the pavilion towers and were also active places for worship.

From ignorance to prominence:

During the British occupancy of India, the colonizers started introducing newer technologies to harvest the groundwater and the rainwater with no regard to the ecology of India. Hence the disregard for the stepwells started growing and soon these structures fell into decline and vanished from the collective memory of the people. Victoria Lautman, a Chicago-based journalist spent considerable time exploring and documenting the stepwells in India. She too opines that "...they (stepwells) were left abandoned during the British regime which brought it to the present deplorable shape." (Lautman, 2020) After being ignored for over a century, and the water issues in the country increasing, many historical subterranean water architectures are making a comeback. Organisations like Gram Bharati Samiti (Rajasthan), Global Heritage Fund, INTACH, and The Flow Partnership have recently been working towards conserving and preserving the stepwells. There are also individual players in the social field who wish to revive the stepwells to lessen the challenges that people are suffering due to excessive water scarcity. Prominent amongst them is Anupam Mishra who has written books that document the process of building stepwells as well as the reason why these structures were perfect for climatic conditions like India (Mishra, 2011). After the listing of Rani-ki-vav as a World Heritage Site (UNESCO, 2014), there has been increased awareness about the use and the value of the stepwells. Many blogs, news articles and exhibitions have been written and organized to support and create awareness of the necessity to revive and sustainably re-use the stepwells (Gajjar, 2017).

Besides the conventional approaches toward conserving and preserving the stepwells, there has been a growing interest amongst the contemporary arts in the revival and sustenance of the stepwells. There have been virtual exhibitions, dance shows, futuristic reinterpretation of the space and also adaptive re-use of the space as an art centre. When we see the bigger picture we come to realise how the very essence of the stepwells' artistic value has made them into inspirations for different kinds of arts.

How are these historical structures influencing/inspiring the contemporary arts? The contemporary arts in India are influenced by a myriad of subjects ranging from feminism, politics, societal taboos, and more so by the *cultural baggage* of our heritage. Many artists are fascinated with their past and how it affects the present and the future. This is a concept that excites, inspires and urges them to create art that not only documents but also questions the heritage in which we are born. In the case of stepwells, the visual arts had the most influence.

The Visual arts:

The stepwells' artistic endowments and the rich cultural history of the subterranean architectures make them a popular influence on the visual arts in the country (Livingston & Beach, 2002). We have had multiple exhibitions on them, their history and the need to preserve and conserve them. However, these have been limited in their outreach. Stepwells have a grandeur that makes them unique architectural features, nevertheless, their current state and value are below par when we compare them to other monuments in India. This apathy saw a visible change mostly post the books written by Jutta Jain-Neubauer and Morna Livingston. These authors paved the way the stepwells are now known. The exhibitions did help elevate their status and bring them into the contemporary art circuit. In 2016, Kanoria Center for Arts, Ahmedabad opened an exhibition 'Stepwells of AHMEDABAD'. This was a collaborative effort of a diverse group of researchers, practitioners, young graduates, students and concerned citizens that brought to the fore the important element that made up the city of Ahmedabad. This endeavour documented 16 stepwells in and around the city hoping to garner interest and raise discussions not only about the structures themselves but also about larger issues of water, settlement patterns and social relationships to which these stepwells are connected. Within this framework, the exhibition was successful in starting a conversation on their current condition, their value and the issues of heritage in the context of an urban landscape. The exhibition was a runaway hit and also travelled to Yale University in 2018. Another similar exhibition that travelled across India, showcasing the marvel of the stepwells was executed by the American Institute of Indian Studies (AIIS), Center for Art & Archaeology (CA&A) and curated by the acclaimed author Mr Kirit Mankodi. This was a virtual exhibition wherein the audience could interact with the architecture through photographs and interactive activities conducted during the exhibition (Jain, 2017).

In the contemporary arts today, the ideas that are trending are the probability of visioning the past in the future. Futuristic representations of the subterranean water architectures by the Indian artists were carried out through a collaboration of an architectural design for The Busride Studio and Design Fabric a group that hosts art events in Mumbai. They wanted to know how an artist will look at a monument made in the past and reconstruct

it based on a distant future ideology. The ephemeral Chand Baori became the muse for this project. Using this structure the artist came up with a remarkable design that essayed the utility of the stepwell if it was still functioning in the distant future (Design Fabric, 2020). Some artists also used the stepwells as a template to repurpose their function. Thus we see how the historical structure has influenced the contemporary arts within the country. In retrospect, the stepwells also benefitted from the contemporary arts. This is because the arts brought the stepwells back into focus and led to many interventions concerning their conservation.

Conclusion:

The stepwells have had a prominent impact on the contemporary arts not in just the visual arts but also with regards to writing. Many authors and bloggers are fascinated with the architecture of the subterranean water bodies that have recently become popular tourist destinations and frequented by travellers. These same tourists are now documenting the stepwells not only for their artist marvel but also because they represent that time in history when water was sacred and revered. Today, water has become scarce and once again is being worshipped as one can never tell when it would start becoming a luxury from a necessity. Hence it becomes imperative on our part to understand the workings of these structures and readapt them for the next generation or rather the *neo* artists.

References

1. Design Fabric. (2020, April 15). *A futuristic look at the stepwells of Chand Baori*. Fabric. in. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <http://fabric.in/India-futures-project/a-futuristic-look-at-the-stepwells%20of-chand-baori>
2. Gajjar, K.M. (2017, May 26). *Exhibition Stepwells of Ahmedabad at Kanoria Centre for Arts | AÇ South Asia*. Architexturez. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://architexturez.net/doc/az-cf-183296>
3. Jain, J. (2017). *Stepwells of Ahmedabad: A conversation on water and heritage | AÇ South Asia*. Architexturez. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <https://architexturez.net/doc/az-cf-183290>
4. Jain-Neubauer, J. (1981). *The stepwells of Gujarat in art: a historical perspective*. Abhinav Publications.
5. Lautman, V. (2020). *The Vanishing Stepwells of India*. Merrell Publishers Limited.
6. Livingston, M., & Beach, M. (2002). *Steps to Water: The Ancient Stepwells of India*. Princeton Architectural Press.
7. Mishra, A. (2011). *Aaj Bhi Khare Hain Talab*. Prabhāta Peparabaiksa.
8. Olson, E., & Strebe, M. (2018, April 24). *Placemaking: The Heart of Heritage Conservation - Global Heritage Fund*. Global Heritage Fund.

Retrieved July 13, 2022, from
<https://globalheritagefund.org/2018/04/24/placemaking-heart-heritage-conservation/>

9. Sandhu, M. (2019). *The Architectural Influence of Indian Stepwells on New York City's Newest Building*. JAIPUR Journal. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from https://jaipur.com/etcetera_post/the-architectural-influence-of-indian-stepwells-on-new-york-citys-newest-building/
10. UNESCO. (2014). *Rani-ki-Vav (the Queen's Stepwell) at Patan, Gujarat*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. Retrieved July 13, 2022, from <http://whc.unesco.org/en/list/922/documents>

IJSER