

Stepwell

Stepwells are wells or ponds in which the water is reached by descending a set of steps. They may be multi-storied with a bullock turning a water wheel to raise the well water to the first or second floor. They are most common in western India and are also found in the other more arid regions of the Indian subcontinent, extending into Pakistan. The construction of stepwells is mainly utilitarian, though they may include embellishments of architectural significance, and temple tanks.

Stepwells are examples of the many types of storage and irrigation tanks that were developed in India, mainly to cope with seasonal fluctuations in water availability. A basic difference between stepwells on the one hand, and tanks and wells on the other, is to make it easier for people to reach the ground water and to maintain and manage the well.

The builders dug deep trenches into the earth for dependable, year-round groundwater. They lined the walls of these trenches with blocks of stone, without mortar, and created stairs leading down to the water.^[1] The majority of surviving stepwells originally served a leisure purpose as well as providing water. This was because the base of the well provided relief from daytime heat, and this was increased if the well was covered. Stepwells also served as a place for social gatherings and religious ceremonies. Usually, women were more associated with these wells because they were the ones who collected the water. Also, it was they who prayed and offered gifts to the goddess of the well for her blessings.^[1] This led to the building of some significant ornamental and architectural features, often associated with dwellings and in urban areas. It also ensured their survival as monuments.

Stepwells usually consist of two parts: a vertical shaft from which water is drawn and the surrounding inclined subterranean passageways, chambers and steps which provide access to the well. The galleries and chambers surrounding these wells were often carved profusely with elaborate detail and became cool, quiet retreats during the hot summers.^[2]



View of a stepwell at Fatehpur, Shekhawati



Chand Baori, in the village of Abhaneri near Bandikui, Rajasthan, was featured in the movies *Paheli* and *The Fall*.



Birkha Bawari, view of a stepwell at Jodhpur

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Names

A number of distinct names, sometimes local, exist for stepwells. In Hindi-speaking regions, they include names based on *baudi* (including *bawdi* (*Rajasthani*: बावडी), *bawri*, *baoli*, *bavadi*, and *bavdi*). In Gujarati and Marwari language, they are usually called *vav* or *vaav* (Gujarati: વાવ). Other names include *dekalyani* or *pushkarani* (Kannada), *baoli* (Hindi: बावली) and *barav* (Marathi: बारव).

History

The stepwell may have originated to ensure water during periods of drought. The water is considered sacred from the time of Vedas and the steps to reach the water level in artificially constructed reservoirs can be found in the sites of Indus Valley Civilization such as Dholavira and Mohenjo-daro.^[3] Mohenjo-daro has cylindrical brick lined wells which may be the predecessors of the stepwell.^[4] The first rock-cut stepwells in India date from 200-400 AD.^[5]

The earliest example of a bath-like pond reached by steps is found at Uperkot caves in Junagadh. These caves are dated to the 4th century. Navghan Kuvo, a well with circular staircase in the vicinity, is another example. It was possibly built in Western Satrap (200-400 AD) or Maitraka (600-700 AD) period, though some place it as late as the 11th century. The nearby Adi Kadi ni Vav was constructed either in the second half of the 10th century or the 15th century.^[6]

The stepwells at Dhank in Rajkot district are dated to 550-625 AD. The stepped ponds at Bhinmal (850-950 AD) are followed by it.^[5] The stepwells were constructed in the south western region of Gujarat around 600 AD; from there they spread north to Rajasthan and subsequently to north and west India. Initially used as an art form by Hindus, the construction of these stepwells hit its peak during Muslim rule from the 11th to 16th century.^[2]

One of the earliest existing example of stepwells was built in the 11th century in Gujarat, the Mata Bhavani's Stepwell. A long flight of steps leads to the water below a sequence of multi-story open pavilions positioned along the east/west axis. The elaborate ornamentation of the columns, brackets and beams are a prime example of how stepwells were used as a form of art.^[7]

The Mughal rulers did not disrupt the culture that was practiced in these stepwells and encouraged the building of stepwells. The authorities during the British Raj found the hygiene of the stepwells less than desirable and installed pipe and pump systems to replace their purpose.^[7]



The 18th-century Baoli Ghaus Ali Shah, in Farrukhnagar, Haryana



Agrasen Ki Baoli in New Delhi

Significance

The stepwell ensures the availability of water during periods of drought. The stepwells had social, cultural and religious significance.^[7] These stepwells were proven to be well-built sturdy structures, after withstanding earthquakes.^[1]

Details

Many stepwells have ornamentation and details as elaborate as those of Hindu temples. Proportions in relationship to the human body were used in their design, as they were in many other structures in Indian architecture^[8]

In India

A number of surviving stepwells can be found across India, including in [North Karnataka](#) ([Karnataka](#)), [Gujarat](#), [Rajasthan](#), [Delhi](#), [Madhya Pradesh](#), and [Maharashtra](#). In 2016 a [collaborative mapping project](#), Stepwell Atlas,^[9] started to map [GPS coordinates](#) and collate information on stepwells. Over 2000 stepwells have so far been mapped.

Significant stepwells include:

- [Agrasen ki Baoli](#), [New Delhi](#)
- [Rajon ki baoli](#), [New Delhi](#)
- [Chand Baori](#) in [Abhaneri](#) near [Jaipur](#), [Rajasthan](#)
- [Rani ki vav](#) at [Patan](#), [Gujarat](#)
- [Adalaj ni Vav](#) at [Adalaj](#), [Gandhinagar](#), [Gujarat](#)
- [Dada Harir Stepwell](#), [Ahmedabad](#)
- [Toor Ji Ki Baori](#), [Jodhpur](#)
- [Birkha Bawari](#), [Jodhpur](#)
- [Shahi Baoli](#), [Lucknow](#)
- [Raniji ki Baori](#) in [Bundi](#), [Rajasthan](#); Bundi has over 60 baolis in and around the town.
- [Panna Meena Ka Kund](#), [Jaipur](#)



The Rani Ki Vav, Patan, Gujarat

In Pakistan

Stepwells from [Mughal](#) periods still exist in [Pakistan](#). Some are in preserved conditions while others are not.

- [Rohtas Fort](#), near [Jhelum](#)
- [Wan Bhachran](#), near [Mianwali](#)
- [Losar Baoli](#), near [Islamabad](#)
- [Losar Baoli](#), [Sher Shah Park](#), [Wah Cantt](#)
- [Makli Baoli](#), near [Thatta](#)



Rudabai stepwell, Adalaj

Stepped ponds

Stepped ponds are very similar to stepwells in terms of purpose but it is important to recognize the difference between these two types of structures. For example, stepped ponds were always built to accompany a nearby temple while stepwells were positioned away from noisy sites and future tourist attractions.^[10] While stepwells are dark and barely visible from the surface, stepped ponds are illuminated by the light from the sun. Also, stepwells are quite linear in design compared to the rectangular shape of stepped ponds.^[8]



Toor Ji Ki Bawari, stepped well, Jodhpur

Influence

Stepwells are certainly one of India's most unusual, but little-known, contributions to architecture. They influenced many other structures in Indian architecture, especially many that incorporate water into their design.^[2] Ram Bagh in Agra was the first Mughal garden in India.^[8] It was designed by the Mughal emperor Babur and reflected his notion of paradise not only through water and landscaping, but also through symmetry by including a reflecting pool in the design. Naturally, he was entranced by stepwells and felt that one would complement the garden of his palace. He built a baoli in Agra Fort. Many other Mughal gardens include reflecting pools to enhance the landscape or as an elegant entrance. Additional famous gardens that incorporate water into their design include:

- Humayun's Tomb, Nizamuddin East, Delhi
- Taj Mahal, Agra
- Mehtab Bagh, Agra
- Safdarjung's Tomb
- Shalimar Bagh (Srinagar) Jammu and Kashmir
- Nishat Gardens, Jammu and Kashmir
- Yadvindra Gardens, Pinjore
- Khusro Bagh, Allahabad
- Roshanara Bagh

Notes

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4. Livingston & Beach, page 19
5. Livingston & Beach, page xxiii
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External links



Stepped well, Hampi



Stepwell in Indonesia



Jachcha Ki Baori in Hindaun, Rajasthan



Shravanabelagola stepped pond, Karnataka

- [Stepwell Atlas](#)
- [Stepwells of India](#)
- [Agrasen ki Baoli](#)
- [Stepwell architecture](#)
- [Stepwells in Karnataka](#)
- [India's Forgotten Stepwells](#) at ArchDaily



An example of water architecture used in a Mughal garden in Lahore, Pakistan

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This page was last edited on 4 April 2018, at 19:45.

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