



STEPWELLS OF AHMEDABAD

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Gender and Patronage

Water and earth manifest in Indian languages and mythology as feminine forms. Water especially has been associated with feminine notions of fertility and abundance by virtue of its role in agriculture and animal husbandry. In the semi-arid landscape of western India where most rivers are seasonal, this literal and symbolic association between water, femininity, and fertility is even more conspicuous. Structures made for harvesting water in this region embody and celebrate this latent femininity, none more so than the stepwell.

Many stepwells were built by women for women, and recent scholarship has shed light on the historical and contemporary agency of women vis-à-vis water. The scholar Purnima Mehta-Bhatt has beautifully elaborated the historic association of women with stepwells. Many stepwells of North Gujarat, she notes, were commissioned by queens or the wives of rich merchants. Women also emerged as the central character or muse, or as mistresses and courtesans in the romanticized historical tales of some stepwells. Many other structures commissioned by men were often built in honor of a virtuous wife, benevolent mother, beloved mistress, or local goddess. Though not always designated as places of worship, stepwells came to be associated with sacrality, as reflected by the figural sculptures and motifs that embellish these structures.¹ Rituals of fertility and prosperity were performed by women close to water sources, often in stepwells. Stepwells therefore became popular settings in the region's poetry and folklore, and many songs depicting the love, betrayal, courage, and sacrifice of these women are compiled by Mehta-Bhatt.

In her book *Her Space, Her Story: Exploring the Stepwells of Gujarat*, Mehta-Bhatt emphatically challenges the historical stereotype of women as passive by shedding light on their agency as patrons² of and frequently the sole donors to stepwells.³ The historian Samira Sheikh also emphasizes the economic and political influence of women by elucidating their many roles in the merchant and pastoralist societies, whether Hindu or Muslim, that dominated the region. It was Rani Udaymati, the queen of the Solanki dynasty,⁴ who commissioned the region's most elaborate and largest known

¹ Samira Sheikh, *Forging a Region: Sultans, Traders, and Pilgrims in Gujarat, 1200-1500*, SOAS Studies on South Asia (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² Patron itself is male-centric, stemming from the root word 'pater,' which means 'father.'

³ Purnima Mehta-Bhatt, *Her Space, Her Story* (Zubaan, 2014).

⁴ The Solanki dynasty, which ruled from 950–1300, preceded the Gujarat Sultanate.

stepwell in the 11th century.⁵ Generally referred to as the Queen's stepwell, this exquisite structure is a repository of figurative sculptures depicting mighty female deities conquering demons, as well as women engaging in the daily activities of drawing water, adorning themselves, or dancing—all of which lend a feminine character to the delicate spatial filigree. Closer to Ahmedabad, adjacent to the village of Adalaj, the *Rudabai vaav* was built in 1499 under the patronage of a noblewoman named Rudabai. An inscription on the stepwell states that the patroness provided funds from her personal treasury for the construction of this ornate and intricately carved structure. Likewise, the *Bai Harir vaav*, located in the former suburb of Harirpur, now the Asarva locale of Ahmedabad, was also commissioned by a woman in the late 15th or early 16th century. While *Bai Harir's* identity is contested, most historical accounts suggest that she was the superintendent of the sultan's harem, and her philanthropy is evident from an inscription found in the stepwell:

*“For the use of eighty four lakhs of various living beings, who may have come from the four quarters and are tormented with thirst...as long as the moon and the sun [endure], may this [well] remain for the nourishment of insects, birds, plants and animals.”*⁶

However, it was the daily routines and rituals of many ordinary women that linked them directly and intimately to the stepwell. Their social lives were entwined with these structures as the routine task of fetching water for their families was relegated to women. For this, they would generally head out together in the early hours of the morning and at dusk. Stepwells thus became social and recreational spaces where women enjoyed, uninhibited, the company of one another in the cool depths of the earth. As one of the few public spaces for women, stepwells provided respite from the male-dominated domains of the town square (*chowk*) or court (*darbar*). At the stepwell, women would share their sorrows and joys, discuss politics, and seek the companionship of other women. Historical records dating as far back as 906 indicate that women may have been part of the stepwell construction process,⁷ though the social status of these women remains unclear.

Today, the advent of pumps and centralized piped water, especially in urban areas, has transformed women's relationship with stepwells. Some stepwells in Ahmedabad have been converted to temples dedicated to avatars of the mother goddess (*maata*), as detailed in [Gallery 5](#). The shrines of goddesses, and by extension the stepwells themselves, are still associated with femininity and frequented by women who continue to perform age-old rituals honoring idols, images, or sculptures of the female deity.

In most parts of the subcontinent, women are still responsible for obtaining water for all household needs. They walk long distances to collect and carry water, and decide how and when to use limited supplies.⁸ This burden is intensified by the worsening water crisis, making these women disproportionately vulnerable to climate change.⁹ This disparity is accentuated not only in rural areas, but also in city neighborhoods that are not connected to the central water grid, cannot afford private tube wells, or are denied hydraulic citizenship.¹⁰ The connection between women, water, and wells

⁵ Kirit Mankodi, *The Queen's Stepwell at Patan*, Project for Indian Cultural Studies, Publication 3 (Bombay: Project for Indian Cultural Studies, 1991).

⁶ Jutta Jain-Neubauer, *The Stepwells Of Gujarat: In Art-Historical Perspective*, 1st ed. (Abhinav Publications, 1981).

⁷ David Hardiman, “Well Irrigation in Gujarat: Systems of Use, Hierarchies of Control,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, June 20, 1998.

⁸ Helen Matzger and Marcus Moench, “Ground Water Availability for Drinking in Gujarat: Quantity, Quality and Health Dimensions,” March 26, 1994, 12.

⁹ “Mainstreaming Gender in Land and Water” (University of Pennsylvania, 2014).

¹⁰ Nikhil Anand, “Municipal Disconnect: On Abject Water and Its Urban Infrastructures,” *Ethnography* 13, no. 4 (December 2012): 487–509.

remains relevant today, as women continue to play a crucial role in rural and urban water management. During droughts, they are the most affected, but also the first to respond and therefore well positioned to become water stewards.¹¹ As the water crisis sheds light on community-based water harvesting efforts,¹² it is the women of the village who are involved in managing water resources more efficiently.¹³ This was reiterated by Ashoke Chatterjee, the former advisor to the World Water Council, during a discussion held at the first installation of the *Stepwells of Ahmedabad* exhibition (2016), where he cautioned that if women are not active participants at all levels of decision making, then efforts to alleviate the water crisis will not be fully effective.

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¹¹ Maria Otero, “Women in Water: Stewards and Agents of Change,” *U.S. Department of State*, June 13, 2011.

¹² “Water Management in Gujarat State: Mix of Policy and Infrastructure Initiatives Result in Green Growth,” 2012.

¹³ Engaging women in water system management has proven valuable in several pilot projects, as demonstrated by the work of SEWA (Self Employed Women’s Association). See *ibid.*