

Conserving Stepwells

As northwest India's stepwells fall into ever worse states of disuse and disrepair, **Amar Grover** investigates a pilot project aimed at conserving these venerable and ancient monuments and restoring them to their former glory

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AMAR GROVER

In June 2014, one of India's great yet surprisingly little-known monuments was inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage List. *Rani-ki-Vav*, or the Queen's Well, an 11th century 'stepwell' originally built to honour a local king, was acknowledged as the 'artistic and technological height of stepwell tradition'. Moreover, continued UNESCO's inscription, the stepwell's construction reflected a 'mastery of this complex technique and great beauty of detail and proportions'.

Stepwells dot both rural and urban areas of Rajasthan and Gujarat states in northwest India. In this semi-desert region of searing summers punctuated by a two to three-month aquifer-replenishing monsoon, stepwells were an ingenious means not merely to satisfy the population's need for water, but to provide a gathering place offering respite from the heat. Instead of simply digging deep, functional shafts, medieval engineers also excavated and lined broad elongated trenches with masonry steps descending through galleries and hallways to a water table that fluctuated with the season.

Today, many of these distinctive wells are in states of disrepair and are often unused. Barely a handful are on the region's tourist circuit. East of Jaipur, Rajasthan's state capital, *Abhaneri* - which resembles an extraordinary inverted ziggurat - draws a few coach parties to admire its eye-catching geometry. In Gujarat's capital, Ahmedabad, you may well have the elaborate 15th century *Dada Hari* well to yourself. At the lowest of its five storeys, muffled city sounds have retreated behind a veil of theatrical gloom and an uncanny silence broken only by cooing pigeons.

Rani-ki-Vav, the jewel in the stepwell crown and by far the most visited, is exceptional in scale and execution. A hundred feet deep and around double that in length, over a thousand sculptures and figurative motifs enliven its walls. Down in the lowest fourth-level gallery, it feels rather like an inverted temple paying homage to the life-sustaining, almost sanctified, nature of water.

TRADITIONAL USE

Visiting these fine monuments, one might overlook the practical and social function which some of their smaller, more modest counterparts can still have today. In northwest India, water has always been scarce enough to be precious. Even now in many rural and semi-rural areas, access to reliable potable and irrigation water is problematic. This situation is exacerbated by a falling water table caused in part by increasing use of ever deeper tube wells to irrigate yet more land for a rising population.

It is against this background that the California-based Global Heritage Fund (GHF) and Holland's Prince Claus Fund (PCF) have teamed up with Gram Bharati Samiti (GBS), or Society for Rural Development, a local NGO based in Amber near Jaipur. GBS focuses mainly on uplifting the lives of the rural poor through improved education, healthcare and basic amenities. Its pilot project has conserved five stepwells and rekindled their practical and social purpose. Several more have been identified and, with sufficient funding, may also be revived in due course.



I began by visiting a pair of modest wells in Bhanpur village near Jaipur. Believed to have been built in the 16th century by a prosperous merchant family they had, like many others, become choked with litter, silt and vegetation even though their adjoining shrines thrived. The main issue was debris; once cleared the wells were in reasonable condition. Now replastered and with a fresh coat of pale yellow wash they look far more inviting. Additional bathing facilities were added making the wells more a focal point in village life.

Says Kusum Jain, GBS' Joint Secretary, 'Traditionally women come here 21 days after giving birth to celebrate. Nine days after death, too, villagers bathe; these are centuries-old rituals which haven't died. But when the wells die, these traditions get diluted.'

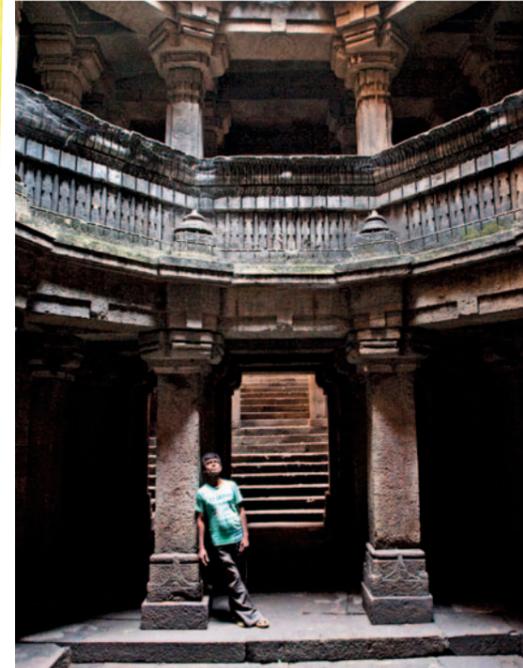
Bhawani Kusum, GBS' founder, director and a long-time social activist reckons most of the wells' decline has occurred in just the last few decades. 'During our surveys,' he explains, 'many older villagers remembered thriving wells with a real sense of community.' Today, he adds, there might be more than one community with 'rights' over a particular well. Their interests don't always coincide; paralysis is inevitably trailed by insidious neglect.

DIVING IN

Perhaps surprisingly, it was village women who proved instrumental in raising awareness of the wells' plight. 'Our self-help groups,' elaborates Kusum, 'mainly comprise women. More than anyone, they really missed the opportunity wells gave of briefly escaping the tedium of domestic life.' Conservative rural tradition dictates that women generally still collect their family's water, yet it seems this is still something of a silver-lined chore.

At *Banjaron-ki-baoli* (like 'vav', 'baoli' also denotes a well) in the remote village of Thali, it was children - all boys - who were ruling the roost during my afternoon visit. Set alongside a dinky temple amid fields just outside the village, a dozen lads shrugged off the baking heat by leaping from the well's parapet into its cool, clean water. Of the five restored wells, this is the most architecturally significant and imposing. Judging from its post-monsoon water levels, it also seems the most successful.





'During our inventory [of wells] many, many locals pleaded for assistance here,' explains Jain, 'so eventually we shifted around ten truck-loads of debris.' The well was slightly deepened to aid its recharging, and the all-masonry construction has benefited from repairs to its walls, columns, eaves, brackets and steps.

Behind the picturesque stepped well lies a functional circular shaft and I was startled to see some daring lads plunging 40 feet into its murk. They could only exit by swimming through a submerged archway to reach the 'plunge pool' and clamber up its steps. Sarita Yogi, the passionate female GBS Project Coordinator who plays a pivotal role in reaching out to and organising many women's self-help groups, showed me an alcove where daubs of saffron-coloured paste indicated the tiniest of shrines.

'Local people believe a kind of ghost-guardian keeps an eye on this well,' she says, 'so unlike most other stepwells there's never been an accident here.' Young children, she adds, are particularly vulnerable because most can't yet swim; and fatalities from broken necks and the like at some wells are not uncommon.

Yogi's role in organising grassroots committees to help clear, clean and maintain these wells is an important part of the project. Deborah Stolk, PCF Programme Coordinator, underlines the fact that her organisation's assistance is predicated upon involvement by and value to the community. 'It's not just about heritage for its own sake or pure architectural salvation,' she says, adding that PCF much prefers to fine-tune locally-driven programmes rather than direct from above.

In tandem with this community-focused approach is GHF's expertise in heritage conservation. Vince Michael, a senior advisor to and trustee of GHF (and until recently its executive director) emphasises its technical and engineering strengths. 'Our projects,' he says, 'tend to be long-running and the goal is

conservation coupled to development.' When it comes to vital fund raising, GHF has considerable reach, too.

WATER ISSUES

Intrigued to see other wells that have tentatively been identified as contenders for conservation, Jain and Yogi took me to see the remarkable *Sevadas ki Baoli*. Hidden away down a slender track winding among bullock-tilled fields, one could easily pass by without realising that the compound's small *chhatra* (a domed memorial) and elevated pavilion mark a somewhat more significant site.

Stepping across fractured masonry and tangly acacia, we stood at the head of a flight of steps that plunged several storeys through a series of archways, alcoves and galleries. Though overgrown, most steps seemed reasonably intact and I cautiously headed down into its depths marvelling at how such an imposing well came to be built in so rural a spot. Historically, say locals, up to 11 villages and hamlets used its water which may explain its size and depth. A handful of greybeards remember pausing to swim here as youngsters while heading to and from school.

Today it is bone dry, almost choked by shrubbery and home to colonies of honey bees and bats. This flora and fauna almost saw me off but there was an exhilarating, almost child-like pleasure in finding one of this well's most elaborate characteristics. Unusually even the walls of the main circular shaft are almost honeycombed with small rooms and chambers linked by tiny passages and stairways.

Yatin Pandya, an Ahmedabad-based award-winning architect and academic who has surveyed and evaluated several wells for GHF, acknowledges *Sevadas'* complex peculiarities and architectural significance. Ultimately *Sevadas* may not be conserved - at least under the auspices of this project - since issues of accessibility and community involvement don't perfectly match its criteria (for example, there is no associated shrine or temple to help villagers reengage with the site).

Moreover, as Pandya notes with regard to stepwell conservation generally and this one in particular, ideally traditional skills and techniques relating to stone masonry and lime plastering should be applied throughout. This could be costly; further, would-be craftsmen might need to be trained and the more elaborate wells would need to be very carefully managed and maintained.

The water issue is more complex - time-honoured dowsing is probably no substitute for clinical hydrology and Pandya urges that the temptation to fill wells with electrically pumped water should be discouraged. Thus far, five wells have benefited from conservation. While they may not have entirely solved issues with the supply of water, it appears that for most villagers here, the wells' reinvigorated cultural and religious value outweighs their strictly functional purpose or architectural merit.

Amar Grover visited Rajasthan and Gujarat with Greaves India (www.greavesindia.co.uk, 020 7487 9111) which specialises in tailor-made itineraries across India.