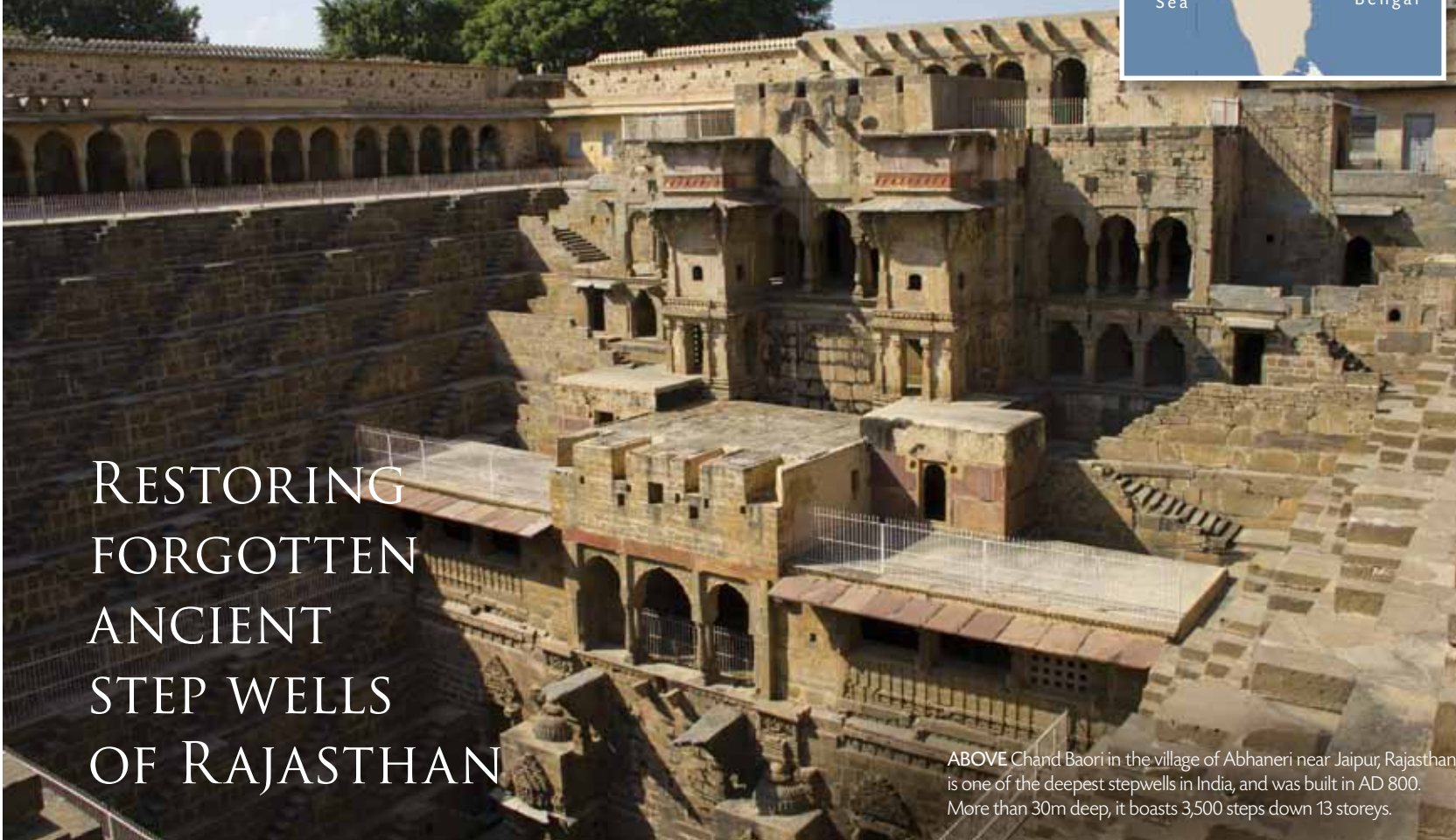


# Stepping down



## RESTORING FORGOTTEN ANCIENT STEP WELLS OF RAJASTHAN

ABOVE Chand Baori in the village of Abhaneri near Jaipur, Rajasthan, is one of the deepest stepwells in India, and was built in AD 800. More than 30m deep, it boasts 3,500 steps down 13 storeys.

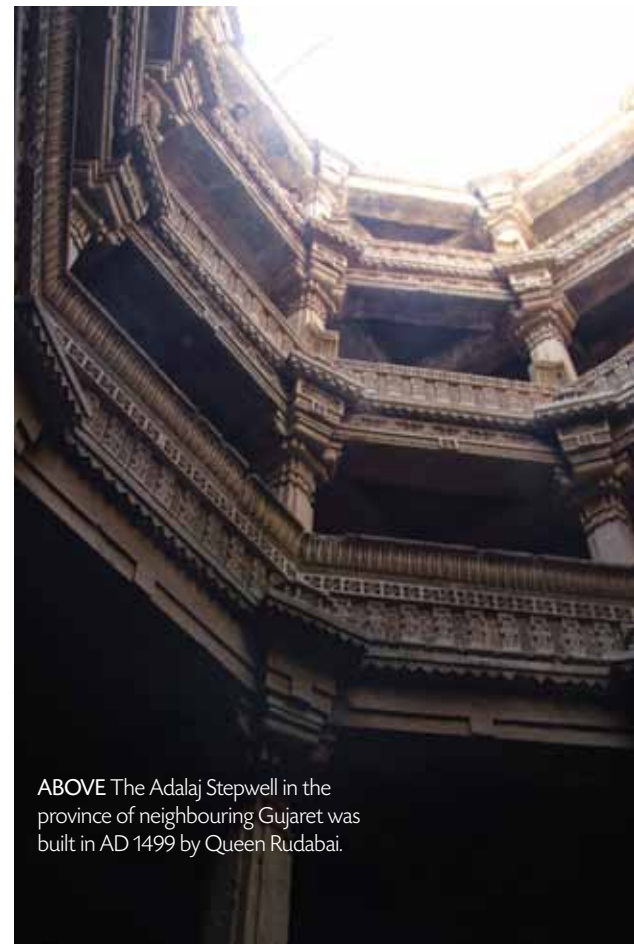
Indian step wells, unique to this part of the world, combine function with fine architectural splendour. Sadly, most have been sadly neglected in modern times. **Bhawani Shanker Kusum** reports on a new project that is restoring many to their former glory.

**E**arly Indian mythology cites five elements of nature: sky, earth, fire, air, and, the most important of them all, water. Water is essential for life in the arid states of in north west India, where temperatures can soar above 45°C in summer. Indeed, it was the ability of early societies here to conserve and control this precious resource that saw the rise of the mighty Indus Civilisation – one of the three ancient civilisations of the Old World – as it emerged along the Indus River, and went on to flourish beyond the reaches of the natural river basin.

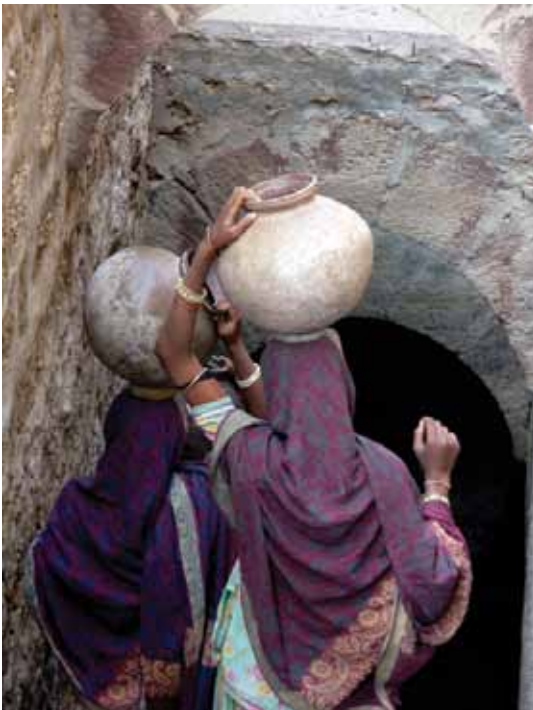
Since earliest times, stone clad cisterns were built to capture rain during the torrential downpours of the monsoon season so that water was available throughout the dry months of the rest of the year; it is from these ancient traditions of water conservation that the ornate step wells, unique to the Indian states of Rajasthan and Gujarat, were created.

### Ritual waters

There are about 3,000 step wells – or *baolis* – in Rajasthan and Gujarat, yet they are largely unknown outside the country, and, sadly, often neglected within. Overlooked



ABOVE The Adalaj Stepwell in the province of neighbouring Gujarat was built in AD 1499 by Queen Rudabai.



**ABOVE** Local women collect water from the step well, a daily ritual that is also a chance to socialise. **ABOVE RIGHT** Renovating down to the depths of Boharaji ki Bawari.



walls, carved columns, decorated towers, and intricate sculpture make them exceptional examples of architecture. Here, travellers would break their long distance journey to quench their thirst and rest in the cool shade.

These stone buildings, some as deep as three to nine stories, are often decorated with elaborate carvings on their walls, columns, and towers: Hindu architecture in Rajasthan, with its origins in the 7th century, was invested with ritual and social symbolism, and the highly decorated step well walls, cornices, pilasters, pillars, and niches reflect this symbolism.

Before beginning married life together, newly weds are taken by the groom's family to their local step well to pay homage to the pantheon of deities, along with the family god or goddess. The well is a symbol of the water of the gods, and the bridegroom, as a mark of respect, is required to take an oath to protect and preserve this life-giving source.

Twenty one days after the arrival of a newborn child, the mother is brought to the step well for the cleansing ritual of 'Jalwa' or 'Kunwa poojan' (worshipping of well or water) associated with giving birth. This is a joyous affair, with the young mother's family forming a procession and singing folk songs, which simultaneously announces to the community at large the arrival of their latest member.

The step well traditionally also played

an integral part at the end of life. On the ninth day following a death in the family, the relatives would take part in a bathing ritual known as 'Nai ka Nahan', to wash away way their grief, and to help them continue in the land of the living.

## Running dry

Most step wells that survive today belong to the Medieval period, though the earliest examples date to 5th century AD – possibly even earlier – and were still being built as late as the 19th century. These magnificent structures are much more than utilitarian reservoirs: their lattice-like walls, carved columns, decorated towers, and intricate sculpture make them exceptional examples of architecture. The stone buildings, some as deep as three to nine stories, are often decorated with elaborate carvings on their walls, columns, and towers: Hindu architecture in Rajasthan, with its origins in the 7th century, was invested with ritual and social symbolism, and the highly decorated step well walls, cornices, pilasters, pillars, and niches reflect this symbolism.

Earthquake damage and general neglect combined with long term droughts, which saw the water reserves dry up, has resulted in many of these magnificent structures being abandoned and forgotten. Eventually, the skills required to maintain and repair the step wells were lost, and finally most of the buildings fell into ruin. Bore holes with hand-operated pumps were drilled into the structures as a short term solution to supply drinking water, but this simply caused further damage.

Now a restoration project is underway to restore these ancient step wells, to not

only provide an efficient means to control and supply water to local communities, but also to re-introduce a vibrant social centre for the people living there. Furthermore, it is hoped that the newly restored wells will attract visitors keen to get a taste of the culture and style of a bygone era, thus generating more business to boost incomes within these communities.

## Future wellbeing

The Gram Bharati Samiti, or Society for Rural Development, with the help of the Prince Claus Fund, has, so far, restored five of neglected step wells in rural parts of Rajasthan, affecting about 7,000 people in 10 villages:

**Banjaron ki Bawari:** The well lies in the village of Thali was built about 1,500 years ago by Lakhi Banjara, the chief of a nomadic tribe in the area long before the village was established. The well is made of a white stone hewn from nearby quarries; the construction was achieved without ▶

**BELOW** The newly restored Banjaron ki Bawari, as seen from the steps that lead down, past the galleries, to the water below.





ABOVE Boharaji ki Bawari and (LEFT) during restoration work.

local people. The same family had already built the temple of Balaji (Hanumanji) here, from which the well takes its name, with rooms for the villagers to perform acts of worships, such as *hawan* (offerings in sacrificial fire) and *yagya* (sacrificial act).

**Bagichiwali Bawari:** In 1625, descendents of the same family responsible for Balaji ki Bawari built the Bagichiwali Bawari in their own village Bhanpur, with another reservoir, outside, for birds and animals. A temple stands at the entrance to the step well, where people perform prayers with water taking from the well, with another enclosure adjacent to it where the villagers meet for social and religious gatherings.

**Chooli Bawari:** A sad tale of sacrifice recounts the origins of the Chooli Bawari. When the Mandar Meena community settled here at Sarjoli, their

BELOW The newly restored step well at Bagichiwali, and (INSET) local people met to relax, socialise and enjoy the cool water.

any supporting or filling material, such as lime or concrete. For many years, the Banjaron ki Bawari was the only source of water for Thali. It was also where the villages came to pray after bathing, at a temple dedicated to the deity Sitaramji that was erected in front of the step well.

**Boharaji ki Bawari:** According to local legend this stepwell and Thakurji's temple were built in 1510 by Deenaramji Bohara on the insistence of his wife. Many cultural and religious events take place here – such as the annual festival for the goddess Jobner Mataji, when thousands of the visitors would bathe in the Boharaji ki Bawari, and then worship in the temple alongside it.

**Balaji ki Bawari:** A wealthy business family from Bhanpur built the Balaji ki Bawari in 1208 in the village of Baas as a philanthropic act to provide water for the

BELOW Balaji ki Bawari.



ABOVE Chooli Bawari.

leader, Kanaram Meena built the step well to provide water for his people, razing a nearby hill in the process. But the well remained dry, so he consulted a wise man. This learned Brahmin told Kanaram that water would come only if someone was prepared to sacrifice their life through self-immolation following profound meditation (a high level of yoga). Kanaram's daughter Chooli volunteered, and water flowed in the step well following her selfless act for the benefit of the community. The step well was named in her honour, and became a centre for religious worship. Hundreds of pilgrims visit the religious here, especially on Mondays and Saturdays - believed to be the most auspicious days prayers. The saint Gyandas stayed here, renouncing earthly pleasures, and another famous Indian saint, Bhartrihari, stayed here while journeying through the region. □

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