

# Sustaining the Stepwells of India

Giving our glorious past a future

Kakoli Singh Baoni

**Sustaining the Stepwells of India**

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First Edition 2018

**Artwork, Illustrations & Cover page by**

Kakoli Singh Baoni



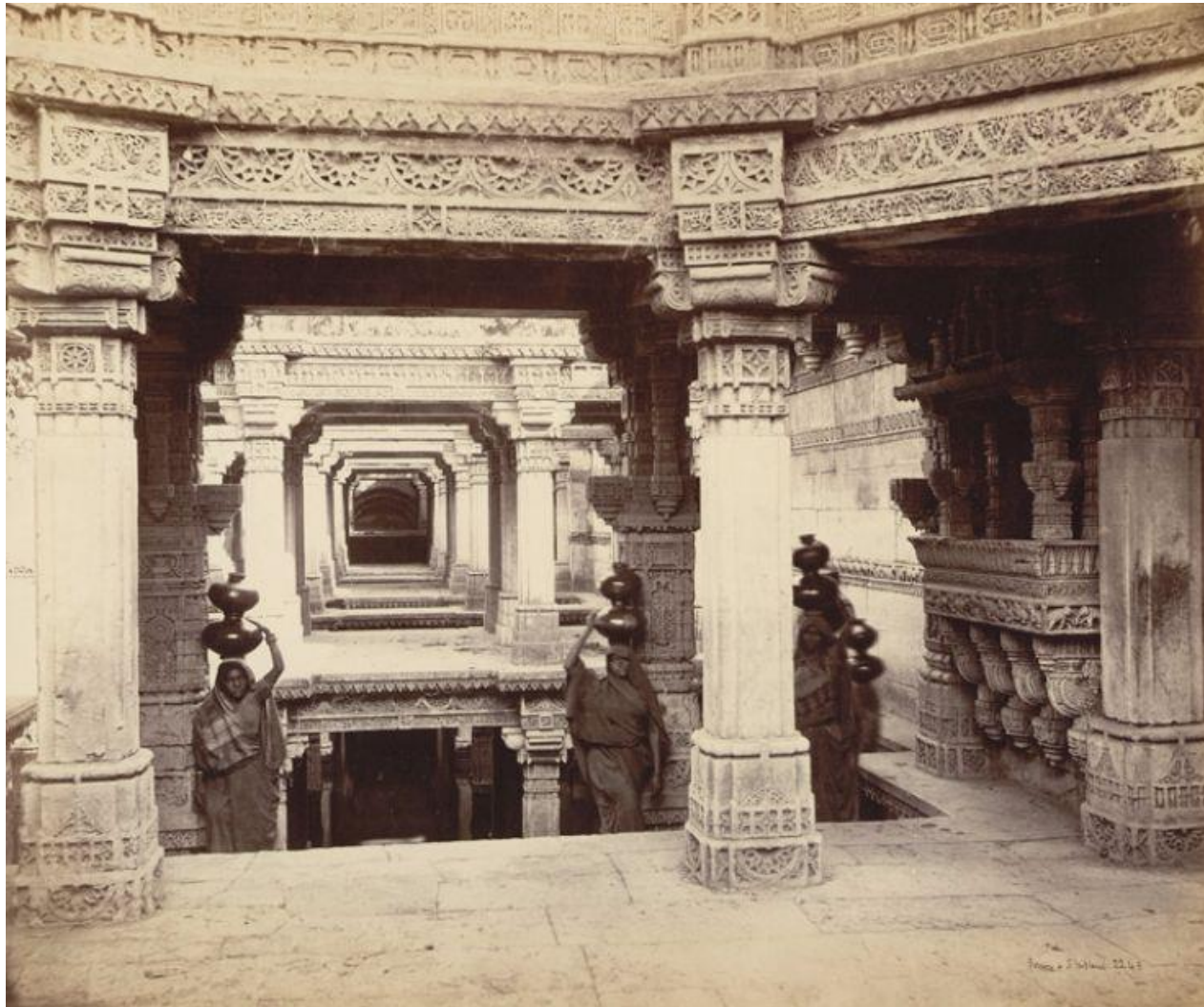
under fellowship from the  
Centre for Cultural Resources and Training  
under the aegis of  
Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India

## Preface

I am not an art historian, I am a practicing visual artist. In my paintings, one can find nostalgia laced with elegance. Old letters, a compass, showing directions, a grandfather clock ticking off days, hours, months with an enviable regularity, architectural ruins, birds, boats and books. They are all part of my narrative. I am not a vocal person. Through my works, I speak and I connect through these threads on my canvas. I have been always a dreamer and a storyteller. Symbols like birds, flowers and roots are meaningfully incorporated into my misty imagery, which speaks softly of the migrants' experience of being uprooted; until they find favorable soil to settle down and bloom where they are planted. My works are the verses of regeneration picturing the imprisonment of spirit and the resurrection of life through spreading of the roots. The spirit of life blossoms from its destructive state, like the mythical phoenix bird. The bird flies freely in and out of my canvas carrying with it the message of freedom.

Historical structures always fascinated me as I grew up in Delhi amidst rich architectural heritage. Moving to Gujarat only further sparked this interest, and I have since enjoyed discovering the wonderful archaeological treasures of this state, and that is how I came into close contact with stepwells. They fit into my work perfectly, very aptly portraying the recurring themes in work, symbolic of nostalgic elegance.

The objective of writing this book is not only an attempt to share the experience of walking into a stepwell through these pages, but also an attempt to sustain these regal structures, to give the glorious past, a future, by incorporating them into the contemporary lifestyle. This book is an endeavour to delve into the history behind the construction of these stepwells and study their evolution. Through research these sites might reveal several layers of development over time: an aboriginal meeting place, a space for ladies gathering while filling water, where lot of religious customs has been performed, the possibilities are infinite.



Women fetching water at the Adalaj stepwell. From James Burgess' 'Photographs of Architecture and Scenery in Gujarat and Rajputana' taken by Colin Murray in c.1872. (Source: bl.uk)



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## Acknowledgements

Many enthusiastic individuals immensely helped during the course of my research. I would like to express my Sincere gratitude to them for without their support, encouragement and assistance, this compilation would not have been possible.

Excellent and carefully researched books on stepwells have been published, notably Morna Livingston's *Steps to Water: The Ancient Stepwells of India*; Jutta Jain-Neubauer's *The Stepwells of Gujarat: In Art-Historical Perspective*; Kirit Mankodi's *The Queen's Stepwell at Patan*; and Jaikishandas Sadani's *The Underground Shrine: Queen's Stepwell at Patan*, Dr Purnima Mehta Bhatt's *Her Spece Her Story: Exploring the Stepwells of Gujarat*; Victoria Lautman's *The Vanishing Stepwells of India* along with numerous monographs and articles. These have made a major contribution to enhancing our knowledge of the stepwells, and I am indebted to them.

## Introduction

Stepwells were an important building tradition in India, Called *vavs* in the Gujarati language, stepwells were developed in India centuries ago to collect and store water for drinking, bathing, washing clothes, and irrigating crops. Early stepwells were little more than a pit in sandy soil, but they evolved over the years into complex works of engineering, architecture, and art. They not only provided water for villagers and farmers, but also offered a sanctuary for travelers and a place to socialize, pray, and meditate. Victoria S. Lautman writes of stepwells as “the ultimate public monuments,” available to anyone except for the lowest-caste Hindu.

I first encountered stepwells when my proposal was approved for Bangalore based Centre for Internet & Society’s “Maps for Making Change Project”. This was a mapping project, so I decided to narrow down and map something which is unique .While documenting the stepwells of Vadodara, I realized as an Artist, that there is so much of history which delve behind this. There are so many historic stepwells, which are just lying in ruins and so many which has already been dilapidated.

The basic necessities of Human life; air water and food; air has been abundantly available in environment .Drinking water has always been scarce. In form of rains which is then served through rivers, ponds and lakes. Still, this gift of water by nature is available only during rainy season, hence unavailability of water in other seasons was a very big question for our ancestors. To get the answer they started making wells, Stepwell and Talaav ( ponds) by digging. They created strategies to create such water reservoirs, thereby such reservoirs were built.

**Stepwell**, Gujarati **vav**, Hindi **baoli** or **baori**, subterranean edifice and water source, an architectural form that was long popular throughout India but particularly in arid regions of the Indian subcontinent. For centuries, stepwells—which incorporated a cylinder well that extended down to the water table—provided water for drinking, washing, bathing, and the irrigation of crops. They also served as cool sanctuaries for caravans, pilgrims, and other travelers during the heat of day or overnight. Commissioned by royal, wealthy, or powerful patrons, they were complex engineering feats and stunning examples of both Hindu and Islamic architecture. *Subterranean Ghosts: India's Disappearing Stepwells*

Stepwells are spectacular subterranean edifices “like skyscrapers sunk into the earth,” explains Victoria Lautman in the video *Subterranean Ghosts: India's Disappearing Stepwells* (2013), produced and edited by Matthew Cunningham. *Written and photographed by Victoria S. Lautman; Produced and edited by Matthew Cunningham*

Stepwell Agrasen ki Baoli, Delhi, India. *Victoria S. Lautman*

As we descend into the subterranean Adalaj or Dad Harir stepwell and feel the changing dampness and temperature; very few realize that there is a strong connection between water and women, Queens, mothers, daughters, mistresses and goddesses – various women have been patrons or inspirations to at least a quarter of the stepwells built in Gujarat.

Historically, this is an important fact that challenges assumptions that women were passive bystanders in the course of India's history. (The word ‘patron’ itself is male-centric, stemming from the root word ‘pater’, which means ‘father’.) Evidence supports the fact that women were active agents in promoting art and architecture in the public domain, outside of their domestic duties.

Cooking is one of the strongest ceremonies for life. When recipes are put together, the kitchen is a chemical laboratory involving air, fire, water and the earth. This is what gives value to humans and elevates their spiritual qualities. We celebrate waters’ day on 22nd March every year. As we all know, no one can live without water and this is the first need of any living being. We should understand the importance of water for our nature, life and future.

Water is an essential ingredient in rituals and ceremonies in all religious traditions of the world—this is especially true in India where it plays a vital role in funerals, births and marriages. In Gujarat, a hot tropical region that is also dry and arid, water can make the difference between life and death. Since rainfall is scarce, except during the monsoons, and most rivers are devoid of water during the dry season, the inhabitants of the region devised different ways to obtain, store and manage water—these included rivers, ponds, lakes, wells and stepwells.

In a parched land, the gift of water was precious and quenching the thirst of humans and beasts was viewed as meritorious—an act that gained great merit for the giver. Consequently, men and women of means—kings and queens, wealthy merchants, traders and occasionally even common folk—provided funds and patronised the construction of wells and stepwells. Such acts of charity gained them merit as well as the promise of ‘moksha’ or immortality.

The religious significance of water continues throughout Indian history, right up to the present, evident in the use of the sacred waters in ceremonies relating to the rites of passage—birth, initiation, marriage and death.

Numerous hymns and verses in the Rig Veda, the earliest religious and literary text dating back to 1500 BCE, contain elements of water worship and praise for the apsaras, who represent the anthropomorphic form of water. The apsaras, or celestial nymphs, are described as mothers or young wives who reside in the channels leading up to the sea (Keith, 1925, pp. 141–42). Water was also worshipped in the form of the god Varuna. People believed that the ancestral spirits resided in the waters and could be invoked in places such as water buildings.

In the Vedic tradition, water is said to be endowed with transformative and magical powers (Rig Veda I.23; 17–22).

Referring to the healing qualities of waters, the Rig Veda (I.23; 19–20) states:

Amrit is in the waters; in the waters, there is healing balm; be swift, ye Gods, to give them praise. Within the waters — the waters hold all medicines. The other ancient texts, the Puranas, provide elaborate descriptions of water worship. From these we know that wells, ponds and tanks became associated with sacred altars, the site for rituals and worship. The belief that water bestows long life, wealth and immortality are clearly evident in these texts, along with the belief that they cleanse the sins of the worshiper.

Prior to the construction of a new well, an expert was recruited to select a favourable site. These experts or water diviners are said to possess unique powers of being able to hear the sound of running water underground. For others, an appropriate site is revealed through dreams. These water diviners or panikals are known as 'Bhonyesunghna' in Gujarat and Kutch, and as 'Sunga' in Punjab. Their judgement was said to be unerring. They could predict with accuracy the depth at which the water could be tapped (Masani, 1918, pp. 104–105.)

Digging and opening of the well were marked by elaborate ceremonies. These involved the selection of an auspicious day and time by the priest who, accompanied by the water diviner, the constructor of the well and the labourers, would visit the proposed site to propitiate the deities. According to popular lore, Tuesdays and other days on which the earth sleeps must be avoided as also the first, seventh, ninth, tenth, fourteenth and twenty-fourth days following Sankranti and the day when the sun crosses from one constellation to another.

On the appointed day, the image of the god Ganapati (Ganesh) is installed while the priest recites sacred hymns and offers panchamrit—a mixture of milk, curds, honey, sugar and coconuts— to Ganapati and the goddess Jaladevi. A green silk cloth is spread out on the spot and wheat, betel nuts, copper coins are placed on it. According to Masani, a copper bowl filled with water and gold/ silver coins are also placed, and the mouth of the bowl is covered with mango leaves on which is placed a coconut. This ceremony is known as the 'Ghat-puja' (Masani, 1918, p. 106). This ceremony prescribed by the shastras is intended to propitiate the mother Earth and to prevent interruptions.

Wells, thus, are sacred spaces, and are venerated by offerings of flowers, milk, sweets, coconuts and betel nuts. The niches in the walls are illuminated with oil lamps, intended to scare away evil spirits and the walls smeared with red lac. Often times one can also see flags (dhajas) hoisted near sacred wells or in nearby trees to frighten away the spirits.

Gujarat in western India has been dry and arid from time immemorial. Except during the summer, when torrential rains fall between June and August, the northern and western parts of Gujarat are like a desert. In response to the chronic water shortages, droughts; the inhabitants of this region developed strategies for harvesting, storing and preserving the water from the annual monsoons. For this purpose, wells, stepwells and other water structures were built from the 7th up to the 19th century. Stepwells known as vav or vapika differed from ordinary wells because they had steps leading down to the water and did not require ropes to draw the water. They were also often more elaborate multi-storied structures embellished with art and sculpture.

These structures became a familiar feature of the landscape of western India. The stepwells were a source of life giving water which enabled the land to become fertile and the crops to flourish. The stepwells primarily served a utilitarian function. They also served a vital function as a gathering place for women who came here for water, solace, gossip and exchange of ideas and information, and sites for architectural and sculptural beauty and embellishment.

The region of Gujarat was a vital link in the trade between the north and south. It was located at the crossroads of trade routes. From time immemorial, caravans laden with cotton textiles, silk, indigo dye, pearls, carpets and other goods travelled through this region carrying precious cargo bound for distant lands. In the old days, merchants known as 'Vanjaras' travelled long distances with their merchandise and trade goods loaded on their bullock carts and camels. These traders and merchants often travelled at night guided by the stars and tried to avoid the fierce midday sun. The stepwells, thus, provided not just water for them and their animals but also a dark, cool place, where they could avoid the scorching sun and rejuvenate themselves surrounded by the images of gods and goddesses, and plants and animals on the decorated pillars and walls. In the absence of rest houses and caravanserais, the stepwells offered a place to rest. Many stepwells therefore were built along ancient highways and in the vicinity of small villages and towns that lacked rivers, ponds and lakes and other easily accessible sources of water. Thus they were invaluable. Stepwells were built by rich merchants and, in the absence of the identity of the donor, were referred to as 'Vanjara ni vav' or the merchant's well. Women, pilgrims, itinerant traders, troops on the march and royal hunting parties used these stepwells for water and rest. The landing platforms and ornamental galleries decorated with figurative carvings of deities, animal and plant motifs served as an escape and distraction from their monotonous journeys. They spent a few hours here in these underground buildings to eat their meals, drink the cool water and enjoy a few hours of rest and recuperation. The labyrinthine interior of the stepwell and the dark, cool environment enabled them to revive their spirit and rejuvenate the soul. Charles Moore has aptly stated that 'still waters evoke mystery.'

## Abstract

### Why Stepwells?

"In most cases, there's so little above-ground presence to alert you or prepare you for what you're about to see," Victoria Lautman says. "They subvert the notion of what architecture usually means. We look up at architecture, we look across at architecture, but we rarely do we look down."

By documenting the numerous stepwells of Vadodara, Gujarat & India, these regal structures which were integral parts of daily life earlier, has at least come into awareness of common people. Visual communications always leaves a lasting effect, which is helping the community to be aware of the rich heritage behind these structures

Water which is a major global issue today, the water level going down a major problem, if through the stepwells also which has been a major source of water in the past, & trying to bring them back to use. To bring to light the neglect these once regal structures are undergoing. I want to delve into the history behind the construction of these stepwells.

Within these two years various people who have been associated with these regal structures or just have been located closely to them has been interviewed, through the documentation, a short documentary has been created and shown at various places making people aware of its heritage value. Awareness about these stepwells, might lead to redemption of some of these subterranean edifices. In the situation India's burgeoning water crisis, water levels going down, growing urgency of water conservation, this project has helped to spread awareness of these stepwells and might help to de-slit and reactivate some of these magnificent structures.

We can't let an entire category of architecture slip off history's grid.



Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 20.5/28.5 inches





Oil Painting of Pavilion of stepwell 24/36 inches

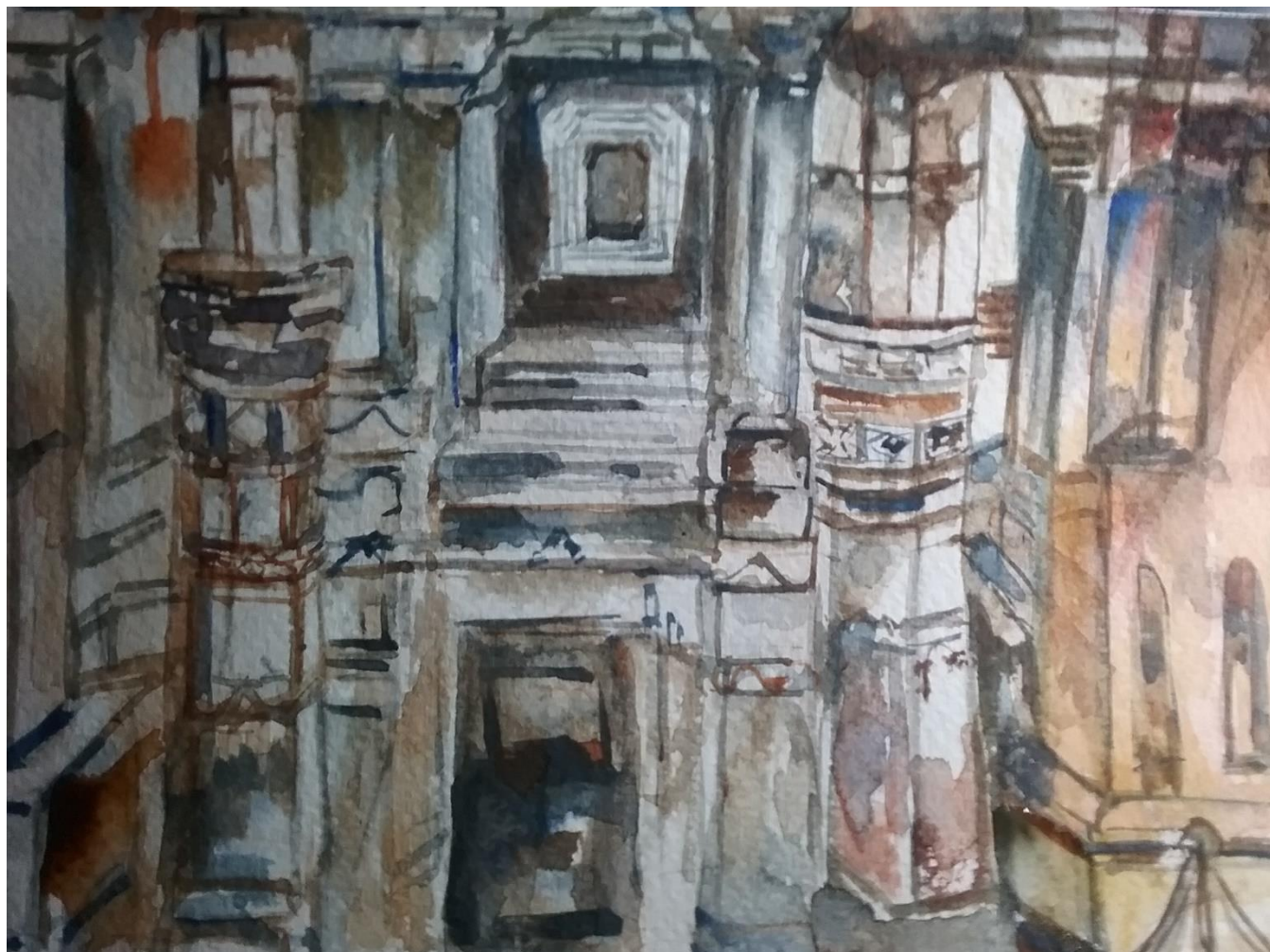


Oil Painting of Asoj Stepwell 24/36 inches



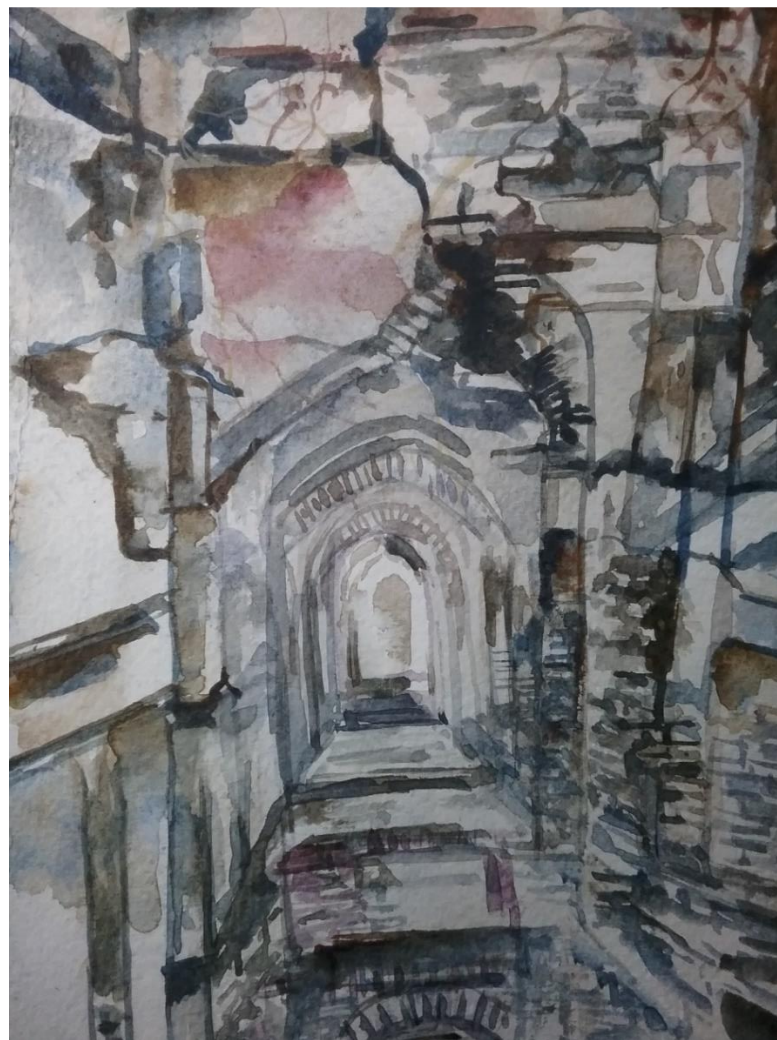


Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 20.5/28.5 inches



Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 20.5/28.5 inches

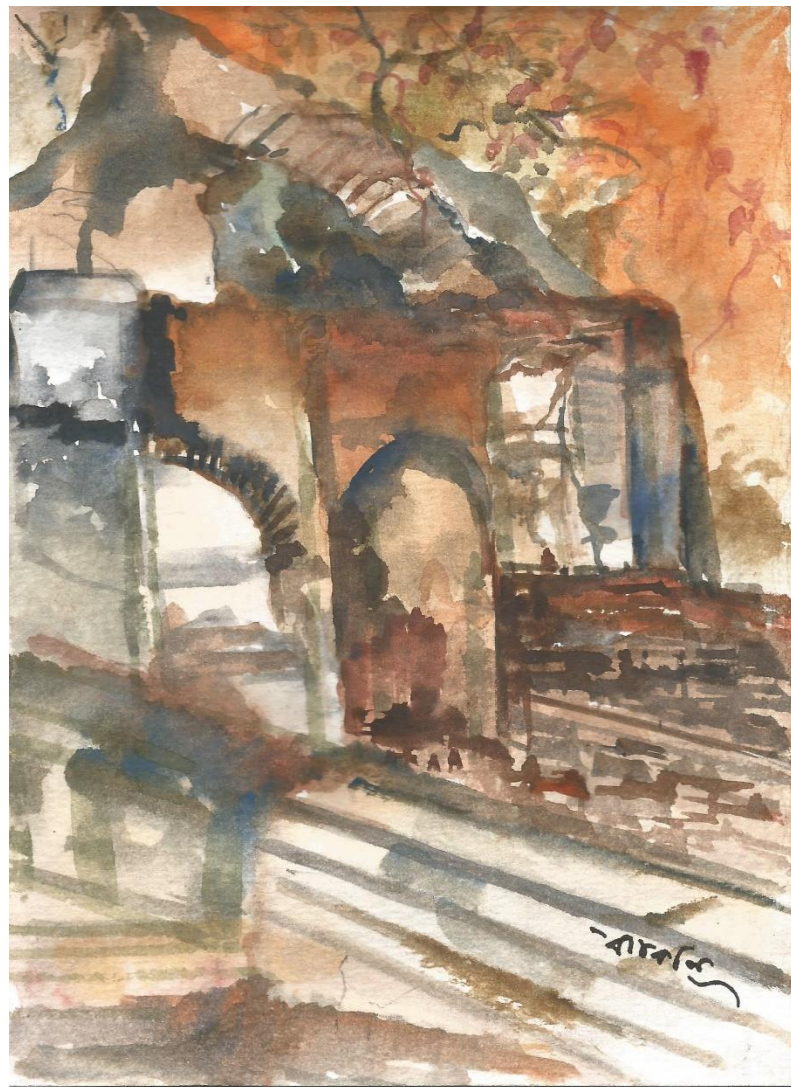




Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 28.5/20.5 inches



Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 28.5/20.5 inches



Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 28.5/20.5 inches



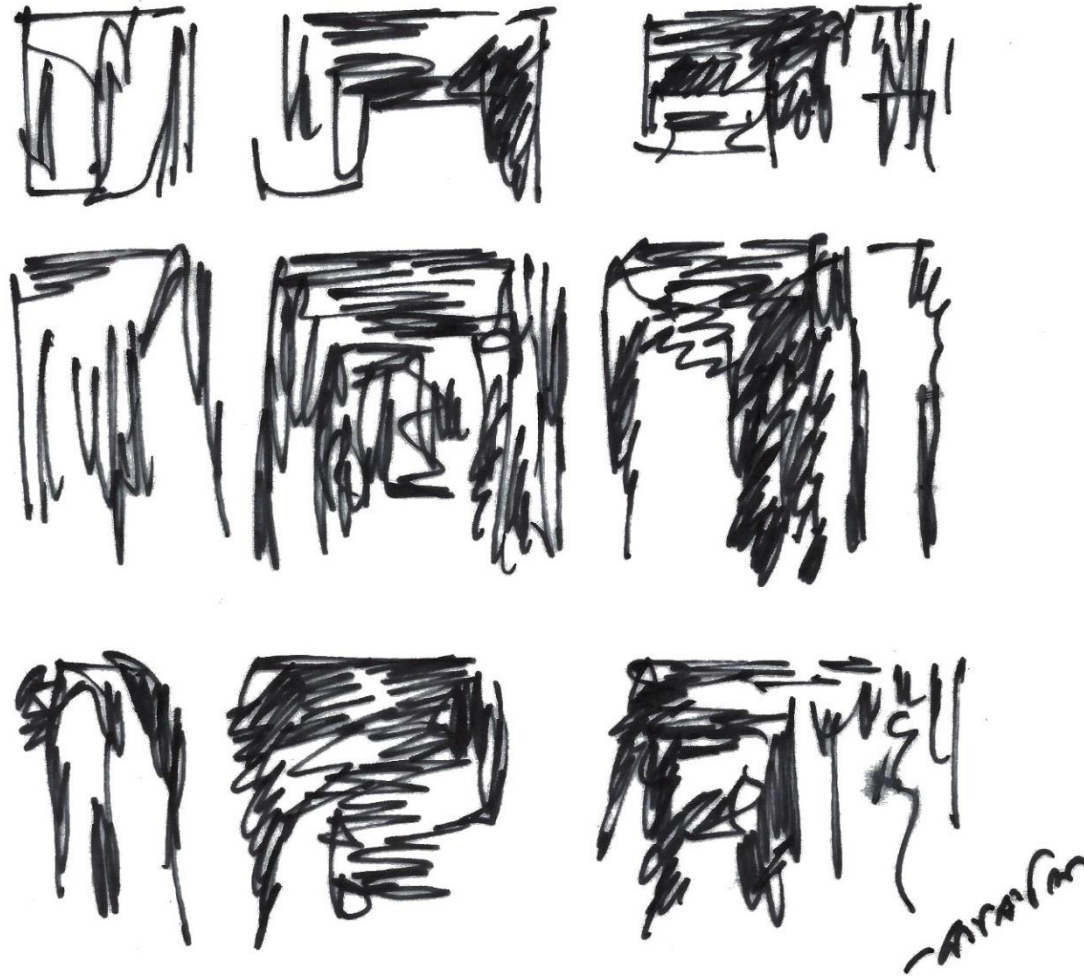


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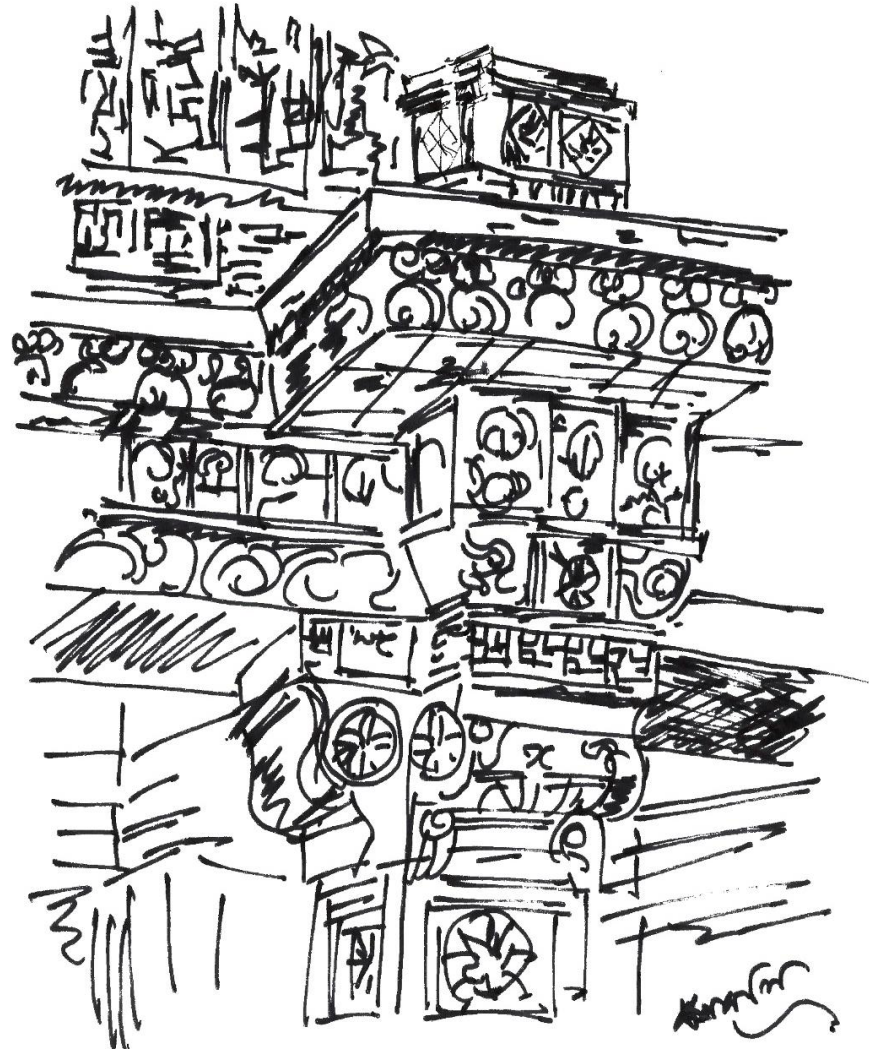
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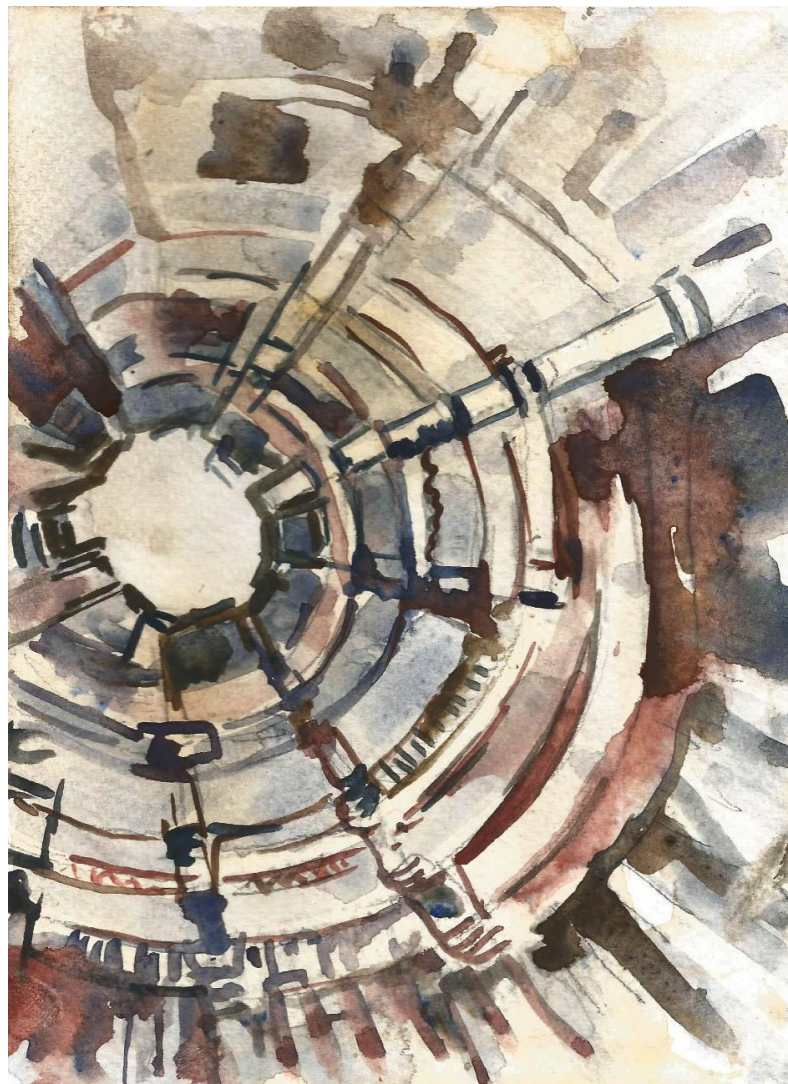
Watercolour on Fabiano Handmade Paper, 28.5/20.5 inches





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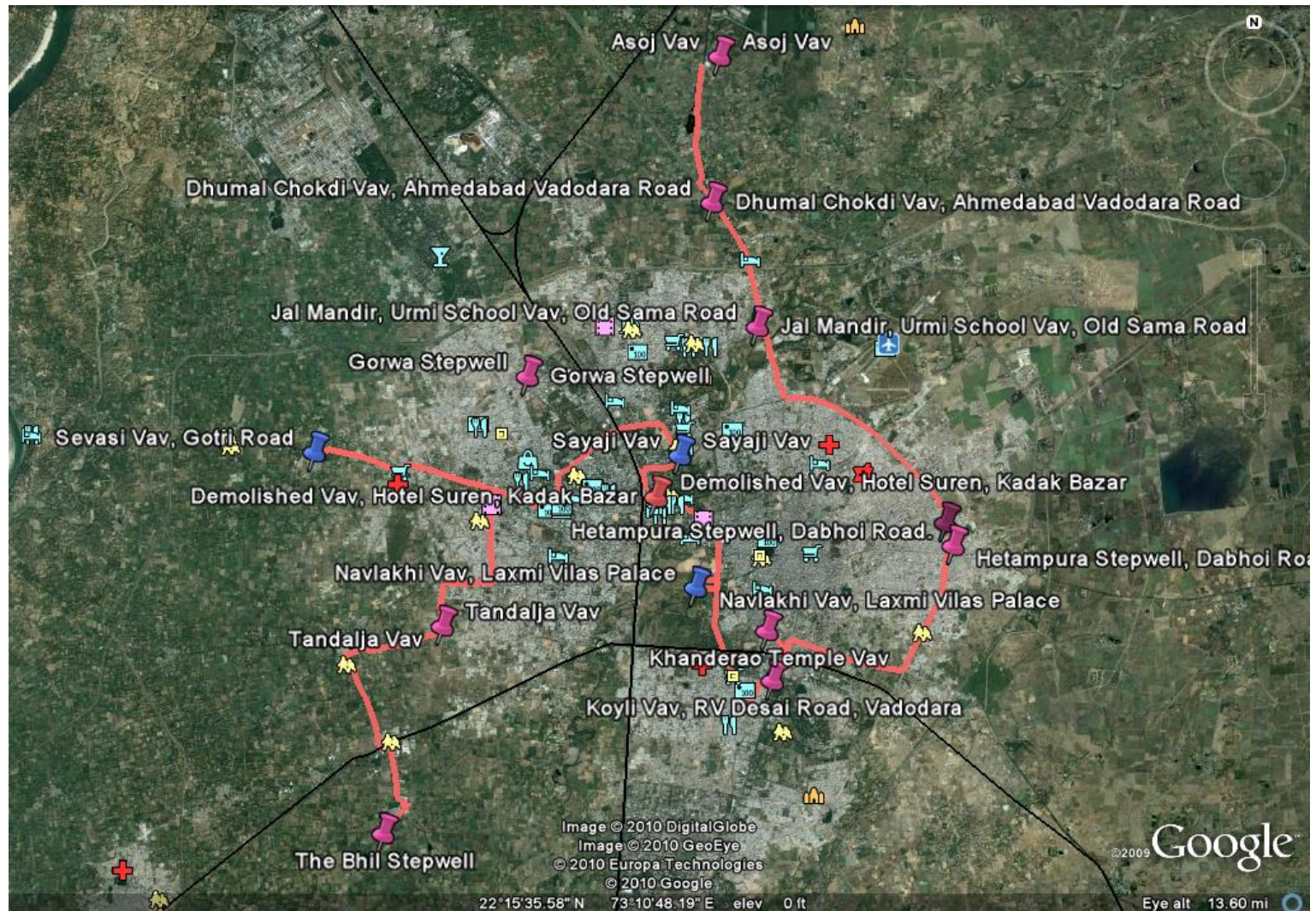
# Project Report I

## Stepwells of Vadodara

1. Khanderao Stepwell
2. Kadak Bazar Stepwell ( demolished)
3. Tandalja Vav ( Demolished)
4. Gorwa Stepwell
5. Sayaji Stepwell
6. Navlakhi Stepwell
7. Hetampura Stepwell
8. Kelanpur Stepwell
9. Dumad Chowkdi Stepwell
10. Urmi School Vav
11. Asoj Vav
12. Vidyadhar Vav, Sevasi
13. Sevasi Helical stepwell
14. Bhimpura Stepwell
15. Mahapura Stepwell
16. Koyali Vav
17. Bhil Stepwell
18. Saptamukhi Vav (Dabhoi)
19. Piparwali Vav ( Tarsali)
20. Sisva, Vanzari Vav
21. Piparwali Vav ( Tarsali)
22. Khadi Vav ( Demolished)

23. Khodiyar Nagar Vav
24. Chhani Vav ( Demolished)
25. Tarsali Vav
26. ONGC Vav
27. Sama Vav
28. Santoshi Mata Vav
29. Mandala Vav
30. Mohan Vav, Kawant
31. Veraimata Vav, karakhadi
32. Amarapura Vav, Amarapura
33. Lachharas Vav
34. Atali Vav, Karjan
35. Vadaj Vav
36. Chhatral Vav





Important Stepwells of Vadodara, Gujarat

### **Navlakhi Stepwell in Lakshmi Vilas Palace Compound**

Navlakhi Vav is the only remnant of Gurjar rule; it's located in the Lakshmi Vilas Palace Compound, which is still the residence of former Maharaja Gaekwad.

This vav is more than 600 years old. The inscription in the Vav mentions Zafar Khan as the Governor of the province of Gujarat. He assumed his regal title Muzaffar Shah in 1407-08. Baroda Nagari no Prachin Itihas ' states that on one of the lower floors of the Vav is a Brahmi inscription saying Suryaraj Kalchuri, a general of the Gurjar Kingdom , built the Stepwell in Vatpadra. It's said that the Vav was called Navlakhi because 9 Lakh Gold Coins were spent to build it. It was refurbished in Muzaffar Shah's time.

The Stepwell is built on an L-Shaped plan and proceeds with four pavilion towers and four intermediate supporting frameworks which is very unique to this stepwell as these are not only two- dimensional frames, but three dimensional networks of vertical and horizontal stone beams. The entrance staircase is set at right angles to the stepped corridor. The right angle is covered with a platform and thus continues into an additional pavilion, being crowned by a small canopy in the middle. The platform of the pavilion is supported by eight plasters and eight pillars. The pavilion which is one storey underground is also entered by a narrow stairway at the western side. The pillars and pilasters are of two types, one more simple and plain, similar to that in the stepwell of Sevasi, the others are very ornate type, in the form of a vase with emerging scrolls. The entablature in the pavilions and frameworks bear designs of hanging leaves and scroll-patterns at their horizontal beams.





The ornamentation of the ceiling inside the first mandapa is made up of rows of half medallions with flower petals and garland and leaf patterns. The ceiling itself is embellished like a huge flower saucer.



The inscription in Persian language mentions 1405 as the year of completion of this stepwell. In all the stepwells water has already dried or stagnant, but in Navlakhi stepwell, the earlier days water was used for drinking in Lakshmi Vilas Palace, and today this water is used for supplying water in Golf Course.



### **Khanderao Stepwell**

Not much research is done on this stepwell. This is inside Khanderao Temple. Dasamah Temple on Khanderao Vao. Khanderao Vao is said to be connected with Khanderao Pond. Link of the interview with a motor mechanic whose shop is in front of the Khanderao Vav :

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Kk74aPzVIPs>





### Kadak Bazar Stepwell

This stepwell has been demolished totally. Shops and hotels constructed on it. The link to the interview of a paan stall owner who has seen the Vav as a child:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nGONER5en64>



### **Asoj Stepwell**

Again this is one of the beautiful stepwells which is right in the entrance of Asoj Village, Vadodara. Though there is still water. The stepwell is not in use. This architectural structure lies unmaintained.



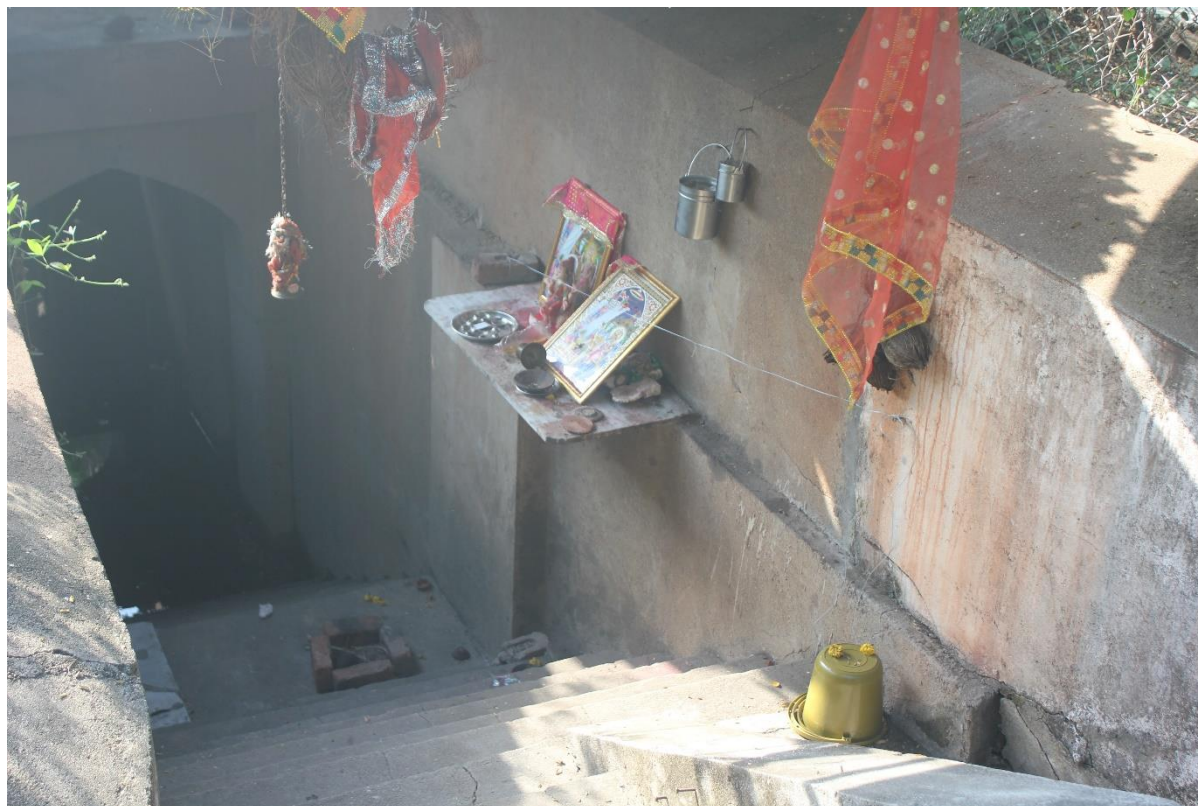
### Piparwadi Vaav

This vav is located in Tarsali , Vadodara. It's a myth that it built by the Banjaras, (Bedouins) 300 years ago. This stepwell is clean as there has been a temple built over it and the temple trust maintains the stepwell. The water of this stepwell is cleaned every year before the temple festival. Fresh ground water percolates in the stepwell again and it starts brimming.



In Vadodara's Pratapnagar locality, a small ordinary stepwell in Shakti Krupa society contains a shrine to the mother goddess Ambamata. There are other images in this vav, one of which is the panel containing four standing *devis*

ONGC Vav





### **Tandalja Vav**

This stepwell has disappeared from the city's landscape.

It was built in 18<sup>th</sup> century which is now lying in poor condition, before three years this stepwell was still brimming with water. Due to neglect and encroachment, a residential colony has come up on this Gaekwadi era stepwell. A dome built on the entrance of the stepwell had artistic murals depicting Gods, animal motifs and narratives of war. Though there is documented evidence of this stepwell, but based on the architectural style and murals inside the dome and on its wall, it can be assumed that this stepwell was built over 200 years ago.

Link to the interview of Kailashgiri Gosai who claims to be the owner of the Vav : [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiUP3SR\\_3bE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PiUP3SR_3bE)







After renovation



### **Gorwa Stepwell**

Again a stepwell which is much neglected and an educational institution is constructed on that. The water has dried up.





### **Sayaji Stepwell**

It's located at Doctor's quarter, near Yavteshwar Compound besides Yavteshwar temple. This place is rarely known to people.

Link to the interview of people residing near the stepwell: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OnGZjLPIRo>





### **Koyli Vav**

Koyli Vav is located opposite Hazira Maqbara. Koyli Vav is situated across Hazira Maqbara , the stepwell was perhaps used to water the garden of the Mausoleum. This vav still has water brimming in it. It's a belief that people taking bath in this water gets cured of skin diseases. So people from far off places just come to take a dip in this Koyli Stepwell Water. Link to the interview: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKzN2wd\\_hZw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKzN2wd_hZw)





**Tarsali Stepwell**







### Hetampura Stepwell

This is one of the stepwell which has still water in it. A temple built on it.  
Link to the interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=15xwOTFUfsk>



### **Kelanpur Stepwell**

A dried stepwell.

Link to the interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uu1vm5KCyeY>



**Dumad Chowkdi Stepwell**

Again one of the stepwells which is full of filth. This vav has also dried up.

Link to the interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z3aTV5zF-KE>





### **Vidhyadhar Stepwell, Sevasi**

The Sevasi stepwell is situated in Sevasi village, about 6km to the west of Baroda. This is also known as Vidhyadhar Vav. It is laid out in the east and the entrance in the west. The stepwell has five pavilion towers and five intermediate supporting frameworks. A round parapet wall of about half a metre height surrounds the stepped corridor and the well. The pavilion tower have four pilasters and four pillars. The lintels of the pavilion towers are either decorated with rows of elongated leaf pattern or flowers in between which garlands are carved. The entablatures of the pillars which are boarding the middle pathway of kuta (tower like pavilion construction in a stepwell); two in the second storey is beautifully carved with sculptures depicting a horse led by its rider. The horses are decorated with bands, tassels and ornaments and they have on raised leg resting on a wave which is a common motif on hero stone. Some other panels depicts geese with scrolls hanging from their beaks and elephants. A stone masonry at the entrance has a name inscribed in Devnagri script. The gate has two tigers carved on the left and two elephants on the right. Stepwells were used to store rain water, and also became sources of legends. It is said, young girls decked in gold were sacrificed at Sevasi stepwell on full moon nights, for prosperity.



**Helical Stepwell, Sevasi**







**Bhimpura Stepwell**



**Mahapura Stepwell**



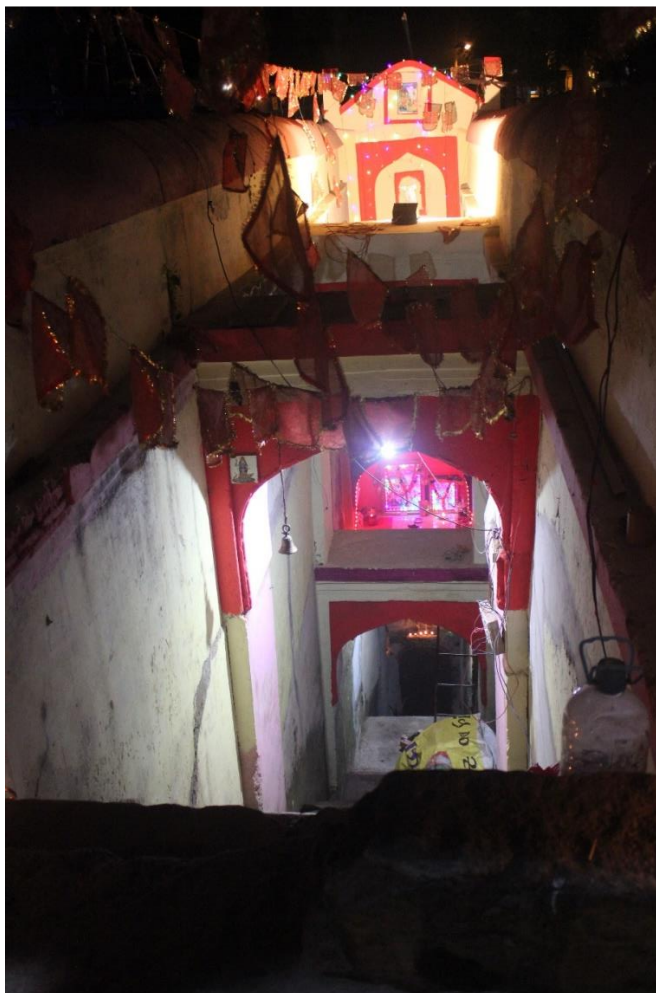
### **Urmi School Vav**

This is a stepwell which has dried. Government has tried to revive it, but in that process the charm of the historical value has disappeared.





Sama Vav







**Santoshi Mata Vav**





Inscription in the Stepwell

**Chhatral Vav**





**Mandala Vav**



**Mohan Vav, Kawant**



**Veraimata Vav, Karakhadi**



This stepwell has a sculpture of Mahishasura

Mardini. She is depicted as riding a lion and near the mouth of the lion there is a demon. Near the goddess is an image of a long *naga* or serpent.

According to Pathak, it is probable that at some time a serpent lived in the waters of the well and was worshipped as a deity (ibid., p. 215).

**Amarapura Vav, Amarapura**



**Laccharas Vav**





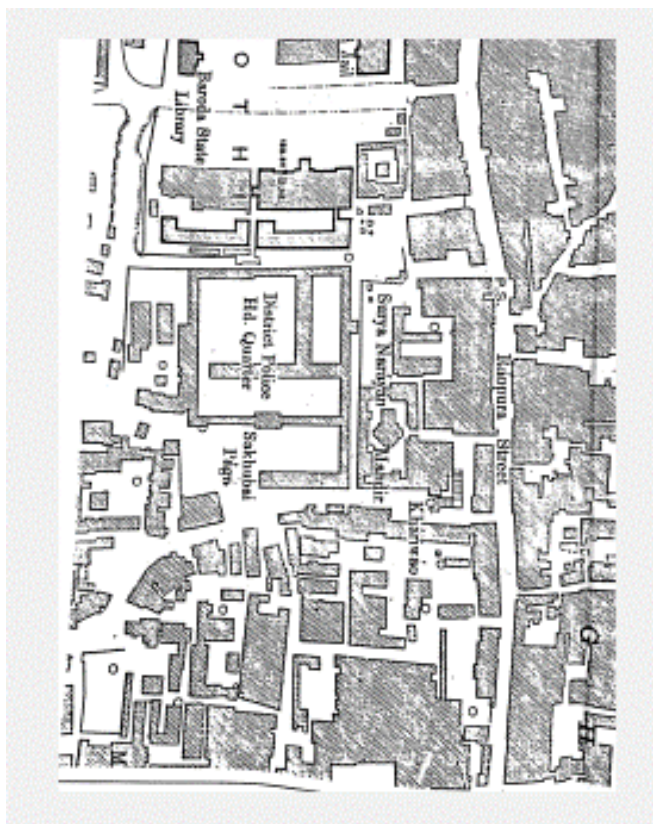
**Atali Vav, Karjan**



**Vadaj Vav**



**Khari Vav ( demolished)**



**Chhani Vav**





**Khodiyar Nagar Vav**



### **Saptamukhi Vav**

This is a beautiful stepwell located near a lake at Dabhoi. The structure which is named a stepwell is actually a temple situated at the bank of the Nagesvar tank, built during Visaldeva Vaghela's reign. This Vav consists of a Central shrine with porches on the north and southern side. The stepwell is approached through an entrance in the east.



### **Bhil Stepwell**

Similar dilapidated condition, this stepwell has still water in it. A beautiful structure of olden days.



**Sisva, Vanzari vav**





## Project Report II

### Stepwells of Gujarat

Ahmedabad, Patan Siddhpur , Chatral

1. Stepwell of Dada Harir, Asarwa, Ahmedabad
2. Stepwell of Maata Bhavani, Asarwa, Ahmedabad
3. Ashapura Maata ni Vav, Bapunagar
4. Jethabhai ni Vaav at Isanpur
5. Vaav at Vadaj
6. Khodiyar Maata ni Vaav at Vasna
7. Vaav at Bhadaj
8. Gandharva Vaav at Saraspur
9. Pouranik Vaav at Bapunagar,
10. Sindhvai Maata ni Vaav at CTM,
11. Amritavarshini Vaav at Panchkuva
12. Ambe Maata ni Vaav at Malav Talav
13. Kali Maata ni Vaav at Bapunagar
14. Vaav at Doshivada ni Pol.
15. Rudabai Stepwell, Adalaj, Near Ahmedabad
16. Stepwell of Siddhpur
17. Queen's stepwell ( Rani Ni Vav) , Patan
18. Chatral near Mehsana

**Dada Harir Ni Vav**



Dada Harir or also called Bai Harir Stepwell is situated at Asarva, Ahmedabad, which is to the northeast of the old city. This stepwell derived its name from the patroness, Bai or Dada Harira, who is said according to the inscription, to have built the stepwell.

The construction of this stepwell fell in the reign of Sultan Mahmud Begada, somewhere in between A.D. 1448-1511 and was paid for by Sri Bai Harir Sultan, the lady superintendent of the sultan's *zenana* or harem. There are two inscriptions in the stepwell—one in Sanskrit dated 1499 and the other in Arabic dated 1500 C.E. The inscriptions provide a wealth of historical and other information, though some of it is contradictory and also controversial. The substance of the inscription says, 'Bai Harir caused a well to be built in Gurjara country, in the village of Harirpur, north-east of Ahmedabad at a cost of 3,29,000 (mahmudis).'

The stepwell is laid in the east west direction, the well; being at the western end and the entrance in the east. It has five storeys and five pavilion towers. The stepped corridor measures 72.5m from the head of the stairs to the back wall of the well. It descends in a straight line to the fifth of the underground story. Nowadays, the stepwell is completely dry. On both sides but outside the area of the stepped corridor, spiral staircases, one on each side lead from the top level down to the water level passing through all the five storeys. The entrance to each storey is through an arched door.

In the inside wall of the well at each storey, one small niche is introduced at the centre of the back wall. These niches are elaborately carved and ornamented at the lintels, pilasters and pediments. Inside the niches, there are intricately designed scroll motifs.

This stepwell, modelled after the earlier Bhavani stepwell, is one of the finest examples of Muslim architecture. Because of the Islamic influences and patronage it is totally devoid of any human figural representations. Instead, ornamental and sculptural decorations utilise animal motifs with an abundance of geese, peacocks, elephants, horses, lions and floral patterns and highly stylised scrollwork.

Despite the fact that this stepwell conforms to the dictates of Islamic architecture, it is a beautiful example of the intermingling and intersection of two traditions, Islamic and Hindu.

The stepwell consists of five storeys and each pavilion is 480 metres broad. The pavilion at the entrance of the stepwell *mukha* has a dome above it. Of particular interest in the sculptural decorations are the tree of life, *Kalpavriksha* (an ancient symbol), lotus rosette in vase, two peacocks which flank the stem of a slender tree and two snakes and entwined around the stem of a plant.

The Sanskrit inscription informs us of the names of the *sutradharas* or the craftsmen, mentioning 'Deva', 'Vira', 'Sri-Girana', 'Sayaa'—all of which are Hindu names. This clearly suggests that the Muslim patrons employed Hindu craftsmen and supervisors in the construction of the stepwell.



Pillars and pilasters in this stepwell are all of the same order. They could be identified with the bhadra type of the ancient classical texts, being basically square but having various recesses. The base (kumbha) is tapering and is divided from the shaft (stambha) by two tiers of roll - cornices. The shaft is also square with many recesses, its upper part being marked by four horizontal bands, some of them recessed.



In order to reach from one kuta to the next in the various levels, ledges are built along the walls of the stepped corridor in each storey. Just behind the vav is the mosque of Sultani, and something that should just not be missed. In fact there are two structures (the mosque and the tomb) and you can even climb up on both. In the courtyard, there is an opening which is apparently a cave which connects to Kalupur. Right now it looks more like dumping ground and not exactly very inspiring for the adventurous sort. There are some very small stairs going down somewhere, and somehow there is much more to search from this underground connecting pathway.



### **Stepwell of Maata Bhawani, Asarwa, Ahmdabad**

Mata Bhavani's Stepwell or Mata Bhavani ni Vav is a stepwell in Asarwa area of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. This stepwell was built in the 11th century during Solanki dynasty rule in Gujarat. It is one of the earliest existing example of stepwells in India. 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. A much later constructed small shrine of Hindu Goddess Bhavani is located at lower gallery from which the stepwell derived its name. The stepwell is 46 metre long and 5.1 metre wide at entrance.

It has three stories and three pavilions. The diameter of well is 4.8 metre.

The construction of this well is splendid and is one of the longest wells.

A long flight of steps leads to the water below a sequence of multi-story open pavilions positioned along the east/west axis. The step well was built after considering the different water levels across seasons. The well served water not only to people but also to animals. Therefore, in a way the well met community needs and religious needs as well. And that's why this particular step well is considered sacred.

Though this step well is not as decorated as other step wells, nevertheless it still has decorated columns, ornate brackets and intricately designed arches and panels. Thanks to Mata Bhavani's temple, even today this step well is lively and colourful.

The stepped corridor descends for three storeys downwards and there are three pavilion towers. A small shrine is built in the second storey at the back wall of the well, a narrow structure resting on a platform which is supported by brackets. Just below the ground level are three pairs of brackets which earlier must have been supporting the device for hauling up water by brackets.



The ornamentation here is very moderate. The only parts with some kind of sculptural or low relief work are the sloping backrests in the uppermost pavilions, the caves of the roofing and the parikrama around some niches. As the whole structure, being a religious place is nowadays plastered all over with a thick layer of white paint, the reliefs of the parikrama are hardly recognisable. The sculptural work in the Mata Bhavani stepwell is too flat, lifeless and unnatural. The dominance of non-figurative motifs and the application of the squatting lions of stereotyped formation could be a hint that the uppermost pavilions were added or rebuilt after the Muslim period





**Ashapura Maata ni Vav, Bapunagar, Ahmedabad**

In the Ashapura maata ni Vaav, the first pavilion has been converted into a shrine dedicated to the Goddess Ashapura and the informal settlement has grown along the edge of the stepwell on the either side.







### **Jethabhai ni Vav at Isanpur, Ahmedabad**

This stepwell is constructed by Jethabhai Jivanlal Nagjibhai about a hundred years ago. A number of ancient ornamental parts were used in the construction of this stepwell.



The stepwell has four pavilion towers of different formations, and an entrance pavilion which is in its structure a corbel system of roofing. In the ornamentation of the well one of the mihrabs of the mosque has evidently been utilized. This stepwell is 210 feet (64 m) in length and from 21 to 22 feet (6.4 to 6.7 m) wide, with a dome raised on twelve pillars on the entrance at the west end. It has the usual descents from platform or gallery to gallery. The sculptures in the niches and at the pediments are in some cases older than the stepwell.





They depict Bhairava, Hanuman, Ganesha, a seated goddess Lakshmi with four arms, a full blown flower with a vase hanging down from a chain.

### **Vav at Vadaj**

An 18th century vav in Vadaj near city's most important thoroughfare, Ashram Road, is in ruins. People living nearby have turned the three-storey stepwell into a virtual dump zone. The only time an attempt was made to restore the place's grandeur was in Samvat 1991 when two residents of Kalupur Khajurie Por, Chunilal and Bhogilal Chinaye, sponsored its renovation.

Since then, no one has paid much attention to the place. It is currently not known how much of it is in its original form. However, traces of the stepwell's beauty can be found in its stone carvings and compound wall.

The vav in Vadaj was built in the 18th century during the Maratha rule. It is currently not on the list of monuments protected by the state government. This stepwell stands out because of the arches which support the structure. Unlike other stepwells, there is just one bay and very direct connection to the actual well shaft. If cleaned up and maintained, can become a public attraction because of its proximity to Ashram Road.



### **Khodiyar Maata ni Vaav at Vasna**

Not much research is done on this stepwell. Not much historical data can't be found of this stepwell. Orientation of this stepwell is north south. Hindola is celebrated at Aai Shree Khodiyar Temple (Vav) at Hatkeswar Circle area in Ahmedabad. Hundreds of devotees take blessings of Goddess Mother Khodiyar in holy Shravan Month. This time there was the theme of Shavan Bhado for Hindola at holy temple. The holy temple was constructed 25 years ago, before that, there was a step well at this place.

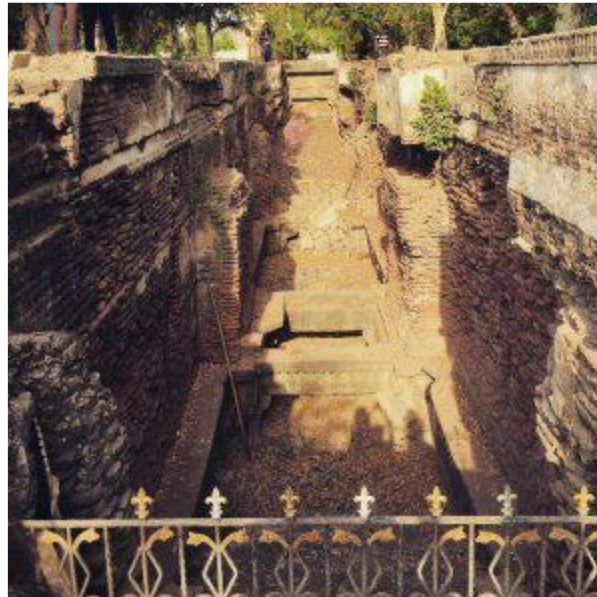


### **Vaav at Bhadaj**

This stepwell is in dilapidated condition found at Bhadaj village on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. Orientation of this stepwell is West East. Not much is written about this.







This stepwell is now in ruins and smaller shrines dedicated to Goddess Kali now surround the stepwell.

### **Gandharva Vaav at Saraspur**

Orientation of this Vaav is east west. The uniqueness of the temple comes from the arches that support the structure. A small to the Goddess Kali Mata can be found in the main wall shaft.



**Pouranik Vaav at Bapunagar**

Orientation of this Vaav is South North.



### **Sindhvai Maata ni Vaav at CTM**

The Sindhvai Maata ni Vaav is located near CTM crossroads, Ahmedabad. Orientation of the temple is North South. Unlike other stepwells, the temple is dedicated to Goddess Siddhvai Mata , is adjacent to the temple and does not occupy the actual stepwell instead. This stepwell is unfortunately in dilapidated condition and is often used as a garbage dump.





### **Amritavarshini Vaav at Panchkuva**

Amritavarshini Vav, also known as Panchkuva Stepwell or Kathkuni Vav, is a stepwell near the Panchkuva Darwaja in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India. Panchkuva, literally five wells, area derived its name the five wells in the area. Like most step-wells, this too is designed to store water, rainwater diverter and provide a resting place for the traveller and visitors and work as underground tank.



According to sanskrit and Persian inscriptions in this step well, it was built in V.S. 1779/A.H. 1135 (A.D.1723) by Raghunath Das. Raghunath Das was diwan to Haidar Quli Khan, Governor of Gujarat during the Declining period of Mughal rule.



Sparsely ornamented, Amritavarshini Vav is notable for its L-shaped plan and has simple design. It has three storeys and is more than 50 feet deep. The bracing arches have different shapes at the two storeys and in the kuta (pavilion tower) before the well shaft. It was declared a protected monument in 1969 and was conserved in 1999. It was recharged later by digging in 2004.

### **Ambe Maata ni Vaav at Malav Talav**

The Ambe Maata ni Vaav is a temple dedicated to Goddess Amba. It is situated at the lake adjoining the Malav Talav. This is yet another example of a stepwell converted into a temple. The walls of the temple have extensive mirror work. The original structure and texture of the stepwell is unknown. The orientation of this stepwell is North South.



### **Kali Maata ni Vav at Bapunagar**

Orientation of this stepwell is West East.  
Not much data is available of this stepwell.

### **Vav at Doshivada Ni Pol**

Not much data is available on this Vav. Research continues.





### **Khodiya Mata Stepwell, Bapunagar**

The orientation of this stepwell is Easy west. This stepwell and the community which lives around this stepwell share a unique relationship with one another.

This stepwell lacks ornamentation and is a narrow structure with a beautiful banyan tree which has grown over the wall.

Only the main well shaft of the original stepwell is intact and the remaining part of the stepwell has been greatly modified for the temple purposes .

Research continues.

### **Rudabai Stepwell, Adalaj**

Set in the quiet village of Adalaj, this vav has served as a resting place for hundreds of years for many pilgrims and caravans along their trade routes. Built in 1499 by Queen Rudabai, wife of the Vaghela chief, Veersinh, this five-storey stepwell was not just a cultural and utilitarian space, but also a spiritual refuge. It is believed that villagers would come everyday in the morning to fill water, offer prayers to the deities carved into the walls and interact with each other in the cool shade of the vav. There is an opening in the ceilings above the landing which allows the light and air to enter the octagonal well. However, direct sunlight does not touch the flight of steps or landings except for a brief period at noon. Hence some researchers say that the atmosphere inside the well is six degrees cooler than the outside. Another remarkable feature of this stepwell is that out of the many stepwells in Gujarat, it is the only one with three entrance stairs. All three stairs meet at the first storey, underground in a huge square platform, which has an octagonal opening on top. The vav is a spectacular example of Indo-Islamic architecture and design. The harmonious play of intricate Islamic floral patterns seamlessly fusing into Hindu and Jain symbolism embody the culture and ethos of those times. All the walls carved by ornamentation, mythological scenes along with everyday scenes of women churning buttermilk, dancers accompanied by musicians, women adorning themselves and a king sitting on a stool. Fascinating to many visitors is the Ami Khumbor (a pot that contains the water of life) and the Kalp Vriksha (a tree of life) carved out of a single slab of stone. There is a belief that the small frieze of navagraha (nine-planets) towards the edge of the well protects the monument from evil spirits.



It derives its name from the lady patron who had built this stepwell, Ruda, the wife of the Vaghela chief Virasimha, as it is mentioned in the inscription. The stepwell is 75.3 metres in total length. It is laid out in north-south direction, the well being in the north and the entrance in the south. The platform is resting on 16 pillars eight of which are standing at the corners of the octagon and two each in front of each main side, marking the four directions of the stairs.



In each storey a small niche is introduced in the back wall. i.e, the northern end.

The horizontal layers of the well wall are stressed by string course of various ornamental patterns. The pillars and pilasters inside the pavilion are plainer in comparison to those of the intermediate frameworks. The ornamentation also appears also at the topmost part of the shaft, which is the same as in the pillars of the pavilions. The capitals of these pillars are profusely carved. The corbels on which the brackets are resting are decorated with a hanging life pattern and with reverse bell- like pendants. The entablature is decorated with half medallions with flowers or relief panels and scroll motifs which are evolving.

The middle of the entablature is always marked by a miniature figure set into a square, either Ganesha, Hanuman or Kirtumukha.





The string courses which are running along the sidewalls or divide the wall of the well into horizontal sections. They also appear on walls of the octagonal shaft. They depict flower or leaf patterns or rows of animals. The flower- patterns are half medallions bordered at the lower edge with tassel-like-leaf patterns, or they are rows of geese plucking leaves with their beaks.

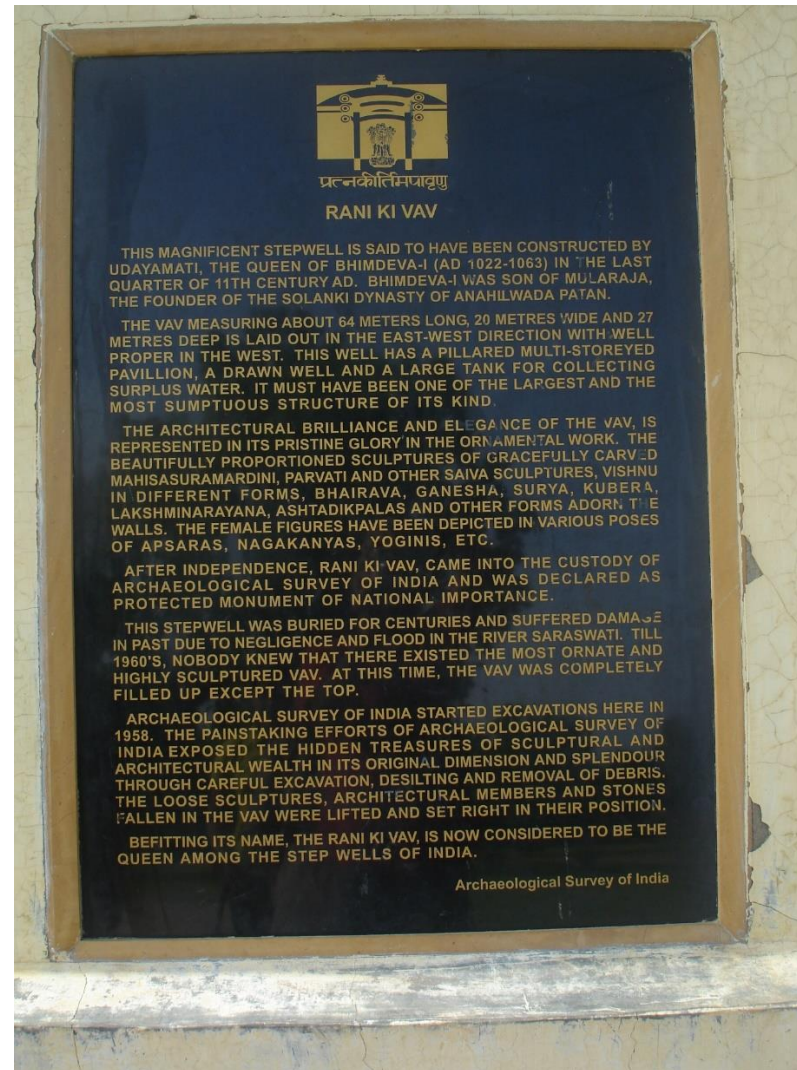


**Stepwell of Siddhpur**





## Rani Ki Vav



THIS MAGNIFICENT STEPWELL IS SAID TO HAVE BEEN CONSTRUCTED BY UDAYAMATI, THE QUEEN OF BHIMDEVA-I (AD 1022-1063) IN THE LAST QUARTER OF 11TH CENTURY AD. BHIMDEVA-I WAS SON OF MULARAJA, THE FOUNDER OF THE SOLANKI DYNASTY OF ANAHILWADA PATAN.

THE VAV MEASURING ABOUT 64 METERS LONG, 20 METRES WIDE AND 27 METRES DEEP IS LAID OUT IN THE EAST-WEST DIRECTION WITH WELL PROPER IN THE WEST. THIS WELL HAS A PILLARED MULTI-STOREYED PAVILLION, A DRAWN WELL AND A LARGE TANK FOR COLLECTING SURPLUS WATER. IT MUST HAVE BEEN ONE OF THE LARGEST AND THE MOST SUMPTUOUS STRUCTURE OF ITS KIND.

THE ARCHITECTURAL BRILLIANCE AND ELEGANCE OF THE VAV, IS REPRESENTED IN ITS PRISTINE GLORY IN THE ORNAMENTAL WORK. THE BEAUTIFULLY PROPORTIONED SCULPTURES OF GRACEFULLY CARVED MAHISASURAMARDINI, PARVATI AND OTHER SAIVA SCULPTURES, VISHNU IN DIFFERENT FORMS, BHAIRAVA, GANESHA, SURYA, KUBERA, LAKSHMINARAYANA, ASHTADIKPALAS AND OTHER FORMS ADORN THE WALLS. THE FEMALE FIGURES HAVE BEEN DEPICTED IN VARIOUS POSES OF APSARAS, NAGAKANYAS, YOGINIS, ETC.

AFTER INDEPENDENCE, RANI KI VAV, CAME INTO THE CUSTODY OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA AND WAS DECLARED AS PROTECTED MONUMENT OF NATIONAL IMPORTANCE.

THIS STEPWELL WAS BURIED FOR CENTURIES AND SUFFERED DAMAGE IN PAST DUE TO NEGLIGENCE AND FLOOD IN THE RIVER SARASWATI. TILL 1960'S, NOBODY KNEW THAT THERE EXISTED THE MOST ORNATE AND HIGHLY SCULPTURED VAV. AT THIS TIME, THE VAV WAS COMPLETELY FILLED UP EXCEPT THE TOP.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA STARTED EXCAVATIONS HERE IN 1958. THE PAINSTAKING EFFORTS OF ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY OF INDIA EXPOSED THE HIDDEN TREASURES OF SCULPTURAL AND ARCHITECTURAL WEALTH IN ITS ORIGINAL DIMENSION AND SPLENDOUR THROUGH CAREFUL EXCAVATION, DESILTING AND REMOVAL OF DEBRIS. THE LOOSE SCULPTURES, ARCHITECTURAL MEMBERS AND STONES FALLEN IN THE VAV WERE LIFTED AND SET RIGHT IN THEIR POSITION.

BEFITTING ITS NAME, THE RANI KI VAV, IS NOW CONSIDERED TO BE THE QUEEN AMONG THE STEP WELLS OF INDIA.

Archaeological Survey of India

Rani ki Vav is an intricately constructed stepwell situated in the town of Patan in Gujarat, India. It is located on the banks of Saraswati River.

Rani ki vav was built as a memorial to an 11th century AD king Bhimdev I . It was added to the list of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites on 22 June 2014.

Stepwells are a distinctive form of subterranean water resource and storage systems on the Indian subcontinent, and have been constructed since the third millennium BC. Rani ki vav was built in the complex Maru-Gurjara architectural style with an inverted temple and seven levels of stairs and holds more than 500 principle sculptures.

Rani ki vav, or RAN-KI VAV (Queen's step well) was constructed during the rule of the Solanki dynasty . It is generally assumed that it was built in the memory of Bhima I (r. c. 1022–1064) by his widowed queen Udayamati and probably completed by Udayamati and Karandev after his death. A reference to Udayamati building the monument is in Prabandha Chintamani , composed by the Jain monk Merunga Suri in 1304 AD. The stepwell was later flooded by the nearby Saraswati River and silted over until the late 1980s. When it was excavated by the Archaeological Survey of India, the carvings were found in pristine condition.





This magnificent east-facing step well measures approximately 64 m long, 20 m wide." Most of the sculptures are in devotion to Vishnu, in the forms of Dus-Avatars Kalki, Rama, Krishna, Narsinh, Vaman , Varahi and others representing their return to the world. Nagkanya , Yogini beautiful women – Apsara showcasing 16 different styles of make-up to look more attractive called Solah-shringar .

Around 50–60 years back there were ayurvedic plants around this area, and the water accumulated in Rani ki vav was considered to be helpful for viral disease, fever etc.







The vavs of Gujarat are not merely sites for collecting water and socializing, but also hold great spiritual significance. Originally, the vavs of Gujarat were constructed quite simply, but became more intricate over the years, perhaps to make explicit the ancient concept of the sanctity of water with the addition of carved stone deities. Thus visitors enter Rani Ki Vav as if it is an inverted temple, where one steps down various levels to the water.

The steps begin at ground level, leading you down through the cool air through several pillared pavilions to reach the deep well below. There are more than 800 elaborate sculptures among seven galleries. The central theme is the Dasavatara, or ten incarnations of Vishnu, including Buddha. The avatars are accompanied by sadhus, Brahmins, and apsaras (celestial dancers), painting their lips and adorning themselves. At water level you come to a carving of Sheshashayi-Vishnu, in which Vishnu reclines on the thousand-hooded serpent Shesha, where it is said he rests in the infinity between ages.

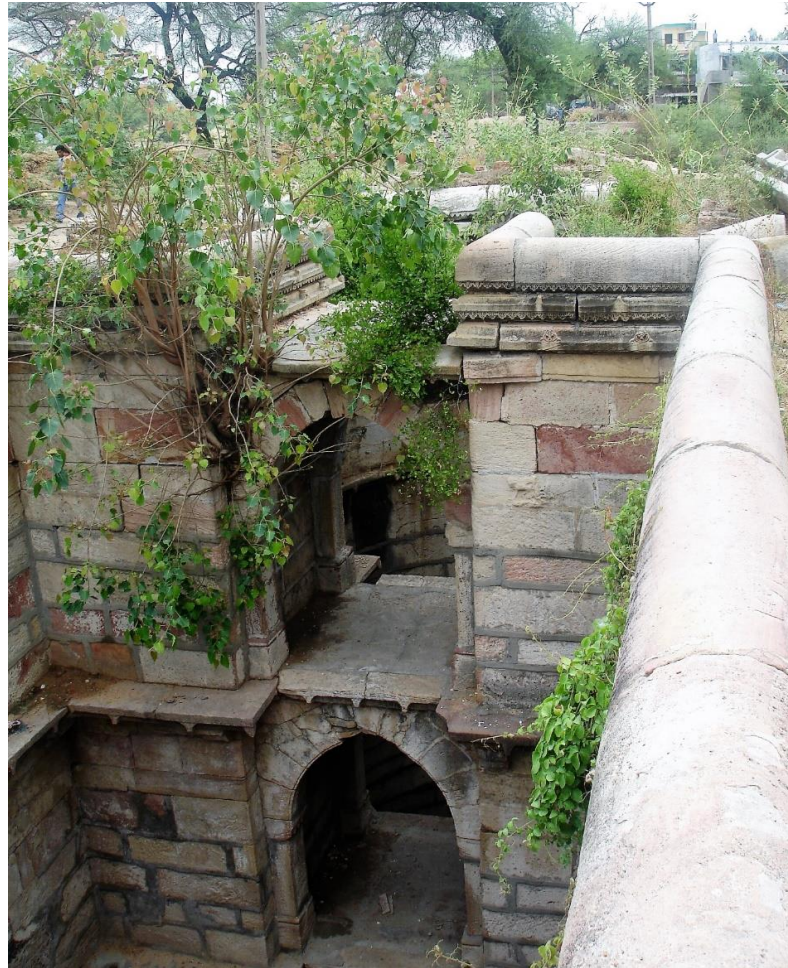
### **Stepwell of Chhatral**

Chhatral is a village in Mehsana district, about 24 km to the north of Ahmedabad. When you enter the village square you immediately see the water tower, the new washing place, a big tank next to a school. A deep clay pit that is left behind adjacent to the square. A lake has formed in the pit, I could see a flamingo among many different birds. This must have had its effect on the watertable in the stepwell.



The entrance of this stepwell is at a 90 degree angle of the main structure, a new form to me. The masonry again is very well done, but time is gaining on this structure. Trees root deep into the walls, it is dirty, no water. The well is dilapidated.





The stepwell does not have much of carved ornamentation, except some sculptures in niches, which are of rather good workmanship, but partly in broken condition. In the wall of the well, there are low relief depiction of two Nagas at the lowest (fifth) storey. Other miniature reliefs of snakes, tortoises, and fish appear on the stone blocks of the well.

## Project Report III

### Stepwells of North Gujarat

*Idar* is a place of historical importance. Himatnagar , which is 55 miles north of Ahmedabad, is situated on the Hathmati river and was founded by Sultan Ahmed Shah of Gujarat in A. D. 1426. He named it Ahmednagar and built a strong fortified wall of local sand-stone around it as a protection against the attacks of the Raos of Idar. Only a portion of this wall, 400 feet long, now exists near the Kalimata Kund on the bank of the river.

The climate of this place being cooler than Ahmedabad, the Sultan used it as his summer resort and built for himself a palace on the hillock on which the present palace now stands. The Maharaja General Sir Pratapsinghji Saheb renamed it Himatnagar after his favourite grand -son the present Maharaja Shree Himmatsinghji Saheb.

### Kund at Idar







Idar continued to be the capital of the State for hundreds of years till the late Maharaja Sir Pratapsinghji Saheb removed the seat of Government to Himatnagar in 1902.

It is situated, in the central part of the State, at the foot of a hill, historically known as Ilva-durg or fortress of Ilwan. It is 18 miles north of Himatnagar. As the precipitous hill forms a natural stronghold, it has earned the popular name of 'Idario-gadh' which forms the pretty theme of many legends and local songs.

It has stood many a siege and the enemy had many times to turn back baffled after ravaging the city on the plain.



The city has, therefore, suffered many upheavals and does not possess monuments worth its antiquity except some Jain temples on the hill and in the city, the Vajra Mata cave temple, the 'Ruthi Ranee-no-Malio' or the residence of the angry queen, have been built for a Ranee of Rao Bhan, on the highest summit of the hill, Rao Ranmal's Chowki or guard room, also on another summit, the Kalnath Mahadeo and Limbhoi step-well behind the hill, Asha Dabhi's step-well near the Ghanti and Chatrabhujji step-well in the city. There is a fortified wall round that part of the city not protected by the hill. All the above places do not seem to date earlier than the 14th century.

The Ranmalesar, the Palesar and the Ranee tanks also belong to the 14th century and later periods. There are also remnants of a large old tank at the foot of the western part of the hills, where bricks have been largely used instead of sand-stone. People call it 'Fata Talav'. In the case of the first three tanks where sand-stone is used steps go deep into the water.

There are some manuscripts in Sanskrit on old palm leaves in the Digambar Jain Library which shows the connection of the religious teachers of the sect with Deccan and Karnataka. Many of these are religious and medical treatises.

### **Stepwells in North Gujarat**

Ankol Mata Vav at Davad, Idar

Stepwell at Gambhirpura, Idar

Brahma Temple Step-well at Khedbrahma

Kaji Vav at Himmatnagar

Step-well at Munai

Limbhoi stepwell

Chaturbhujji Stepwell

Aditi Stepwell

Asha Dabhi's Stepwell

Ratala Stepwell

Vaijnath Mahadeo Stepwell  
Tintoi Stepwell  
Pesina Stepwell  
Bhanpur Stepwell  
Gorol Stepwell  
Raigadh Stepwell  
Samlaji Stepwell  
Dhrangadhra – Naga Bava Stepwell

*And many more...*

### **Ankol Mata Vav at Davad**

Ma Ankol ni vav (also known as Davad ni vav) This stepwell is located in the village of Davad in the Sabarkantha district. The oldest stepwell, as yet found, is the Ankol Mata step-well at Davad said to have been built in the 11th century. While no inscription has been found on it, a text written in the past century titled Davad Purana says the stepwell was built by a merchant named Anko after whom it was named. However, there seems no clear consensus on who built this stepwell. Some scholars hold the view that it was commissioned by Queen Hansoldevi, the wife of Siddharaja Solanki. The stepwell contains a shrine honouring the local goddess Vihat Mata, depicted as slaying the buffalo demon. This may represent Mahishasura Mardini. This image was given the name of Ankol Mata. There is an inscription in the shrine with a date of 1249 and a mention of 'Davad'.



There are sculptural decorations in the stepwell of erotic scenes (maithuna), Kirtimukhas (or victory faces) and floral designs. There are several representations of the goddess most notably of her dancing, standing, and holding a drum. The Ankol-Mata step-well, like all the step-wells of that period, contains some beautiful ornamental sculpture. Scenes of daily life include depiction of sexual intercourse and that of a woman serving water from a pitcher to

a seated couple. The amorous and explicitly sexual scenes also depict women engaged in sexual intercourse with animals and convey a sense of humour and playfulness.

The stepwell is situated on the eastern outskirts of the village. Its general architectural structure corresponds to the first class of stepwells of the classical silpa texts having one entrance and three pavilion towers (trikata). Because of its architectural structure, this stepwell represents a very interesting and rare variation of type one. The descending passage is made of two systems: the usual parallel steps and also lateral stairs attached at various levels within the stepped corridor.



The stepwell is laid out in a north-south direction, the well; being in the south and the entrance being in the north.



## Gambhirpura Stepwell

વ, ઈડર (ગંભીરપુરા)

ચક્રટી

માં કૂવો અને પશ્ચિમે પ્રવેશદ્વાર ધરાવતી આ વાવને પાંચ ફૂટ છે. છેલ્લો ફૂટ વા સાથે સંલગ્ન છે. કૂવાની ઉત્તરે સર્પાકાર સીડી અને પ્રનાલ છે. કૂવાની ઉત્તર-ક્ષિણ દીવાલોમાં મદળો અને ફૂટની દીવાલોમાં ગવાક્ષોવાળી આ વાવ અલ્પ સંલકૃત છે.

ઈડરના ઘાંટીના દરવાજા નજીક આવેલી હોવાથી ઘાંટીની વાવ તરીકે જાણીતી છે. સમય ૧૫ મી સદીનો છે.

**Vav, Idar (Gambhirpura)**

**Water for the thirsty**

This 15th-century stepwell has five *kutas* (pavilion towers), narrower than the step-corridors. The top of the well-shaft, adjoining the fifth *kuta*, has brackets on north and south and a water-trough alongside.

Ornamentation is minimal and simple. The spaces between the *kutas* have props resting on ornamented brackets.

Built as community assets, stepwells were fed by subsoil water flow. The soil naturally filtered the water.

**મદલ**  
Detail of bracket

**રક્ષિત સ્થળ**

આ સ્થળ આપણા વારસાનો મહત્વનો ભાગ છે, અને ગુજરાત પ્રાચીન સ્મારકો અને પુરાતત્ત્વના સ્થળો અને અવશેષોના કાયદા અન્વયે રક્ષિત છે (૧૯૮૪-૧૯૮૫ ગુજરાત અધિનિયમ ક્ર. ૨૫). આ સ્થળને નુકસાન કરતા, ભેનો નાશ કરતા કે એના કોઈ ભાગને હટાવતા કોઈને તમે જુઓ તો અટકાવવા વિનંતી છે. આવું કરનાર રૂપિયા ૫,૦૦૦ ના દંડને અથવા ત્રણ મહિનાની કેદને અથવા તો બેઉ સજાને પાત્ર છે.

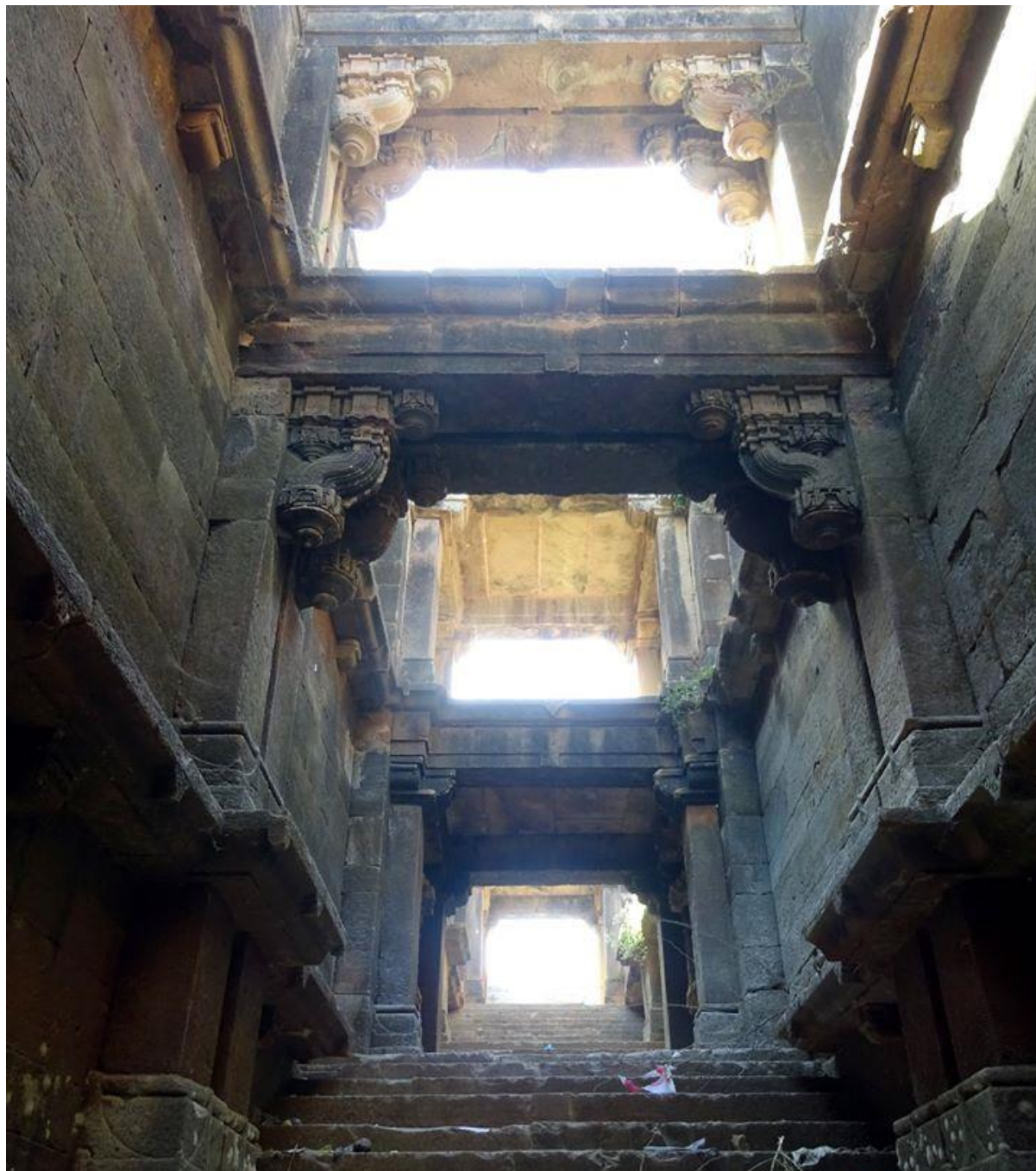
**Protected Place**

This Place is an important part of our heritage and is protected under the Gujarat Ancient Monuments and Archaeological Sites and Remains Act, 1965 (Gujarat Act No. 25 of 1965). If you see anyone destroying, defacing, or impairing this place, or removing any part of it, or imperilling it in any manner, please stop them. Warn them that they are liable to punishment with a fine of up to Rs.5,000, or imprisonment up to three months, or both.

Hiding in plain sight: like so many, it's easy to miss the 14th-century Gambhirpura stepwell in Idar (Gujarat), so unobtrusive is its presence in the landscape. This is one impressively long and also deep structure, with plenty of garbage-y water. Whatever Gambhirpura's fate, the government sign ain't faring much better.













The Kaji-vav (step-well), the Jumma Masjid and a Kund are the only relics of the muslim invasion period. According to the inscription in the Kaji-vav, it was built in Samvat 1578 (A. D. 1522) in the time of Sultan Mujaffar Shah II, by Mubariz-ul-mulk, Governor of Idar. The Jumma Masjid inscription seems to have been removed and lost, and the Kund, though it possesses no inscription is so closely joined with the fort wall that it seems to have been built along with it in A.D.1426. The Kund is a reservoir or tank of moderate dimensions with a covered court all round and tradition says that ladies of the Sultan's harem used to come here for their bath and prayers through an underground passage connected with the palace on the hillock.

**Nagarani Vav at Khedchandrani, Himmatnagar**



### **Vadali**

Vadali, 7 miles north of Idar, is second in importance to Idar and is situated in the midst of a plain which is more or less a fertile valley. It was a large and flourishing place as early as the 6th century as mentioned by the Chinese traveller Hiuen-Tsang who calls it Ochhali. He seems to have visited it on his way to Vallabhipur, then capital of Gujarat. The place was also known as 'Vata-Palli', in the 12th century.

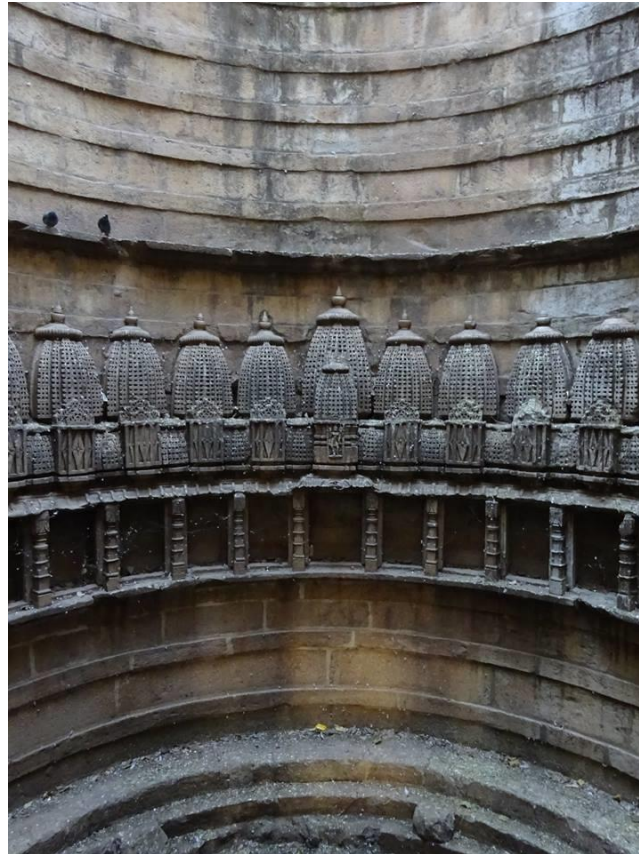
Vadali, as it is at present, is much reduced in size as is apparent from the foundations of temples in the out-skirts. An inscription of Samvat 1264 (A. D. 1208), in the Vaidnath Mahadeo temple about the rebuilding of its Mandap and another of Samvat 1329 (A.D. 1273) on a stone-pillar in the compound belonging to the time of king Arjundev of Gujarat, about a grant of some land or some special privilege to the temple and a third in the Shantinath Jain temple dated Samvat 1275 (A. D. 1219) at the foot of an idol, amply testify to the antiquity of the place.

The Vaidnath Mahadeo temple, the /lower part of the Shantinath temple, some images and pillars in the Rugnathji temple, the Matrikas in the step-well on the east of the village and mounds of destroyed temples are the relics of the past.

At Vadali, as at other places in the State, the spires and domes of temples, destroyed by invaders, have been modestly rebuilt in brick, and mortar. In Vadali and onwards to the north, soft granite, called Vivav or Dantral stone, has been used in the building of temples and step-wells, and it yields to elaborate carving and attains a good polish though more difficult to work upon than Himatnagar-sand-stone.

### **Khed Brahma Stepwell**

Khed-Brahma or Brahma- Kshetra, traditionally the oldest place in the State, is 7 miles north of Vadali and is situated on the confluence of three rivers Harnav, Kausambi and Bhima-shankari . Bhragu had chosen this place for his residence and performed many Yajnas (sacrifices) at this place.



It seems to have been much reduced in size, as is apparent from the half-ruined step-wells and mounds of fallen temples dedicated to Shiv, Goddess and the Sun God on the village-out-skirts and on the opposite bank of the river.



**Sabli Stepwell, Himatnagar**

















Centuries of silt: this stepwell is embedded in the wheat fields around Sabli village. A geometric grid shores up the walls, but until many truckloads of sand are removed, the details and depth of this stepwell will remain a mystery

An inscription from **Aditi step-well** bears testimony, that as late as the 13th century the place was in a prosperous condition. It is said that there were hundreds of temples and step-wells in the place in the old times.

Bricks 15" long, 10" wide and 4" in breadth have been used in the foundations of old time temples and houses and Hindu and Jain images are daily unearthed while digging for laying the foundations of new houses. The bricks bear a crude finger mark as was the practice in the Gupta period. Again some years back 'Gadhaiya' coins of the 4th century belonging also to the Gupta period and bearing the figure of a sacrificial horse, were found while digging in some old ruins.

All this establishes the hoary antiquity of the place.

The Brahma temple and the opposite step-well, the Bhragu Ashram and the nearby temple of Kshetramba (Goddess), the Pankhanath temple, the Amba Mata temple, the Hatkeshwar temple, some Jain temples.

The style of the Brahmaji temple, according to Henry Cousens, belongs to the 12th century. The spire, dome and front part must have been destroyed and have been rebuilt in bricks and mortar.

Fortunately the lower part of the main shrine has remained intact and it is full of good carving including the images of Gods, Goddesses and dancing girls, with the images of Brahma in the niches on the three sides. The inner part of the temple is quite simple and devoid of ornamental carving.

As Pauranic history says that god Brahma himself was responsible for building this temple or at least Bhragu, who stayed here for a long time, many temples must have been successively built on the site in the past and this temple, is therefore, not the original.

The idol of Brahma, is 5' 6" high and his two consorts stand on each side. The image does not seem to be the original. It is likely that the original stone image mutilated by invaders, was plastered over with white cement afterwards to make up the broken parts.

In the matter of preservation of their idols, the Jains were always more circumspect and they concealed their idols at the time of such raids. Quite recently more than a hundred idols, belonging to the Digambars, were laid bare by monsoon water washing away the ground under which they were buried. Some of these idols are kept in the Digambar Jain temples on the Idar hill and they belong to the 12th century.

The step-well opposite to the temple is quite large and well-built. There is no inscription to ascertain its age, but from the stone used in building, a grey granite, it appears to have been built in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. The supports of the super-structure for the Persian wheel and the row of miniature shrines in the well-shaft near the water's edge, which must have contained the idols of gods and goddesses, go to prove that it is very old.

Some three miles, east of Bhiloda, on the road leading to Bhetali and Samlaji, there is a step-well built in Samvat 1599(A.D. 1543) which is called the Retoda stepwell. The names of men and women given in the inscription like those in the inscription of the Tintoi step well, prove that the people of that period possessed a high standard of culture.

Raigadh was a large place in the past and iron was smelted there on a large scale as iron ore and fire wood were abundant in the neighbourhood. The stepwell near Vaijnath Mahadeo was built by iron-smelters in Samvat 1514 (A. 0.1458).

Large and beautiful step-wells are a special feature of this State. They can be counted by hundreds and play no small part in supplying valuable information about the old history and the economic condition of the people. It can safely be said that the territory must have been in a fairly prosperous condition to possess so many step wells, Kunds (rectangular step-wells) and tanks, all of them well-built with sandstone, bricks or local soft granite.

Nearly every good-sized village possesses two or three and sometimes even more stepwells for the supply of good water to the people. The step-wells, invariably contain the images of Matrikas, Ganesh and god Vishnu reclining on Sheshnag attended by Laxmi and other gods which Hindu ladies usually worship for happy family life and preservation of their children. All communities have given their due share in these works of public utility, and we find in the State, step-wells built by carpenters, Iron-smelters, Banias, Nagirs, Brahmins, Barots, etc.

### **Limbhoi Stepwell, Sabarkantha**

Limbhoi is a small village located to the north of Idar Hill. It is reached by a detour of about 4 km from the Idar KhedBrahma road.

Limbhoi step-well near Idar was built as late as the 17th century, Samvat 1681 (A.D.1625).

The stepwell is laid out in a westerly direction, the well being in the east and entrance in the west. The stepped corridor measures 42m in length from its beginning at the entrance pavilion to the back wall of the well. It is 3.10m broad throughout.





The construction is of nanda type, i.e., with a straight stepped corridor and one entrance. There are four pavilion towers (kuta) having three intermediate supporting frame-works in between. The fourth kuta is adjacent to the well. Its storeys are approached by two spiral staircases, one on each side. The pavilion of this fourth kuta above ground level is still intact. It is resting on four pillars and is domed with a conical roof. One can enter it from the sides, whereas the front sides overlooking the stepped corridor are barred with the usual stone bench and kaksasana, the sloping backrest. Entrance to the well from Chhatri side. There are two fine idols of Shiva and Vishnu on each side of the first flight of steps. Then there is a landing with niches on both sides with carved designs all round. At present there are no idols in these niches though really these are meant for the idols.



The main shaft of the well is just beyond the structure in distance, under which there is a fine place for sitting made of stone and connected with the top by two spiral flight of steps on either side. The length of the well is 180 feet.



There are two small sculptures on the top lintels of the first kuta in the first pavilion. They embellish the corners where lintels join the sidewalls. On the northern side, it is Visnu with Lakshmi on Garuda and on the southern side Siva with Parvati on Nandi. On the squarish extremely broad faces of the Gods, one can discern a typical feature of the Gujarati school of sculpture. The benign smile on the faces of Vishnu and Siva, the lively flexure of Lakshmi and Parvati testify the master workmanship in these pieces and to the continuation of the classical tradition of the earlier centuries. The two niches inside the first pavilion are extraordinarily sculptured at the surrounding frameworks. The pediment is of the elongated type, having a deity in its centre; on the northern side it is a Goddess, on the southern side it is Ganesha. The niches themselves are empty. These are the most decorated parts, the other parts of pillars, walls, lintels, eaves and backrest are relatively plain. Limbhoi step-well is simple in construction. But even in its simple style it is quite beautiful.

### Tintoi Stepwell



There are some good step-wells at KhedBrahma, Pesina, Idar, Bhanpur, Gorol, Tintoi, Raigadh, Samlaji.

They belong from the 13<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century the period during which the Raos ruled over Idar.

Many step-wells, like those at Tintoi, Bhanpur, Limbhoi and other places in the State, have been built by Nagir Baniyas, a community very prosperous in the former times.

History of Idar State attests that the Nagir Brahmins and Baniyas formed a large percentage of the population of the State in olden times.

Specimens of old time images and sculptor's art are rescued from old ruins and are kept in the Museum at Himatnagar. Some images found at Samlaji and other places date as early as the 6th century and they are very beautiful and chiselled with great anatomical perfection. They are very useful to throw light on the ancient civilization and culture of the country. There are about 100 images and pieces of sculpture in the Museum and many more specimens are lying on the sites of old monuments awaiting transfer to the Museum.

Maharaj Mansinghji Saheb, younger brother of the Maharaja Saheb of Idar, was a lover of old history and had collected some important inscriptions from step-wells and old monuments in the State.



### **Dhrangadhra – Naga Bava Stepwell**

Dhrangadhra is a town in Surendranagar district. The Naga Bava Stepwell lies outside the town in a north-easterly direction. The name is derived from the adjacent small shrine of a Naga Bava (Naked ascetic), who from generations has attended to the shrine. This shrine might not have been established before the last century and nothing in the stepwell points to its association with the Naga Bava.



The Naga Bava Stepwell is laid out in a north- south direction, the entrance being in the northern and the well in the southern end. On the western side of the entrance, there is a small shrine of Siva, inside which there is an inscription in old Gujarati language in Devnagari script. The inscription mentions the date of completion of the year corresponding to AD 1503.

The dvara pala figures are both similar in size, posture, costume and ornamentation. Both figures stand on a projecting pedestal. They are wearing a coat like upper garment reaching down to the ankles and having many folds. The lower edges bear an ornamental band. Above the waist, an ornamented broad girdle holds the garment tight, both its ends with tassles hanging down. The turban is fitting tightly on the head with a conical cap projecting on top. The earrings are large and prominent and hanging down to the shoulders.

The niche in the eastern side of the first kuta holds a figure of Ganesa, who is to be found in every stepwell. He is sitting on the cushion like pedestal with one leg resting on the seat and the other kept vertically kept down.



### **Hampur Stepwell, Dhrangadhara**

Hampur is a village in Dhrangadhara taluka of Surendranagar district and is situated at a distance of 5 Km (at the village of Rasitapur) from the Surendranagar-Dhrangadhara road. The stepwell is located on the western outskirts of the village.

The stepwell is laid out in the north south direction, the entrance being in the south and the well in the north. The entrance to the stepped corridor is marked by a pavilion standing on a raised platform which is reached by some steps on three sides, the fourth leading down the corridor.



The stepped corridor is narrow and elongated and therefore has to be supported by the pavilion towers and the intermediate frameworks. On the eastern side at the fifth kuta, there is a spiral staircase leading down to lower storeys.

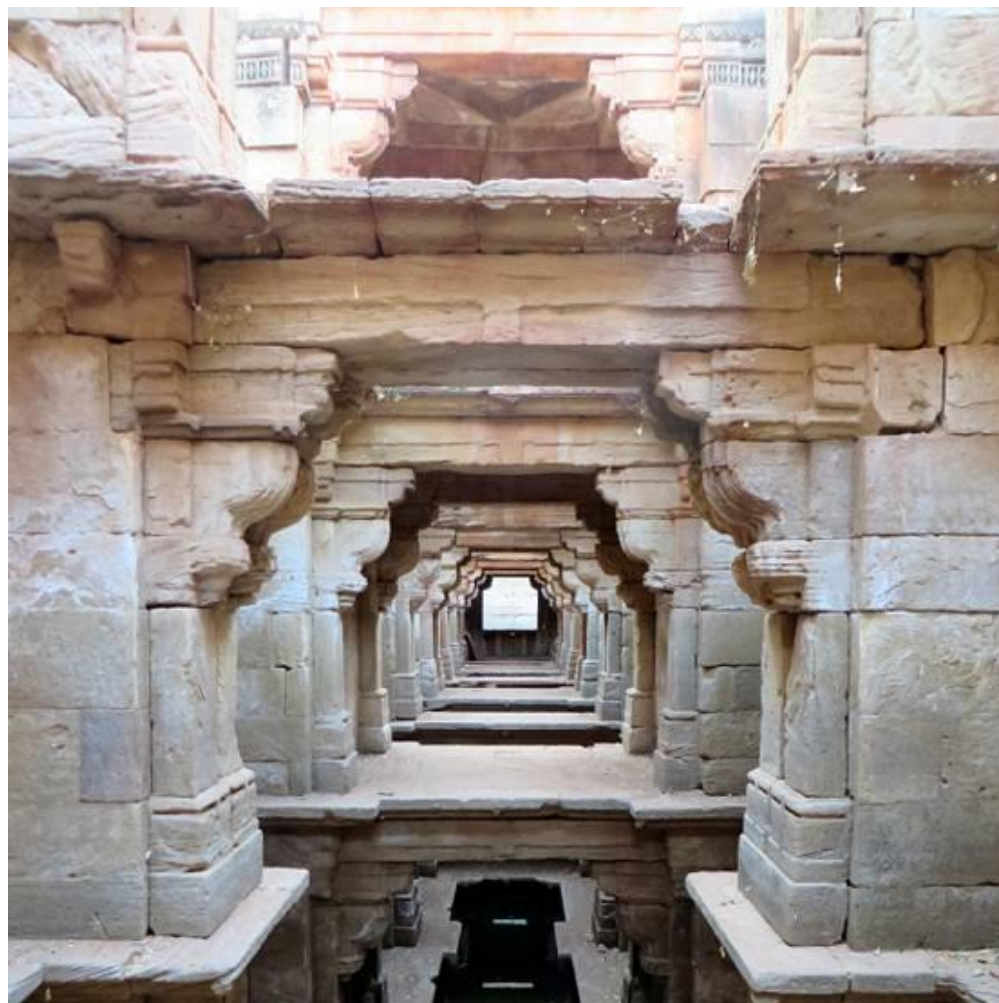
As there is no inscription and sculptural ornamentation, the date of construction of this stepwell can only be surmised from its architectural style- the pillars and pilasters are more in line with the setting of the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, around 1525.

A giant stepwell, but ruined by the 2001 earthquake, yet worth a visit.





**Ratala Stepwell, Rampur**



The stepwell is situated slightly outside the village of Rampura in Surendranagar district. There is an inscription which mentions that Sultan Mahmud Begarah of Ahmedabad and the Parmars were ruling the country. The stepwell has six pavilion towers, and one additional entrance which has now collapsed.



This sculpture of Sheshashayin Vishnu found in the stepwell is very interesting because of its having a row of the nine planets (Navagraha) on the top.

## Project Report IV

Saurashtra, Surendranagar District, Kutchh South Gujarat and important stepwells at other parts of India

### **Ramkund Stepwell , Bhuj**

It is a square stepwell, 56 feet on a side, with sculptures portraying characters from the Ramayana, such as Lord Ram, Devi Sita, Lakshman and Lord Hanuman, as well as the ten incarnations of Lord Vishnu along the walls.

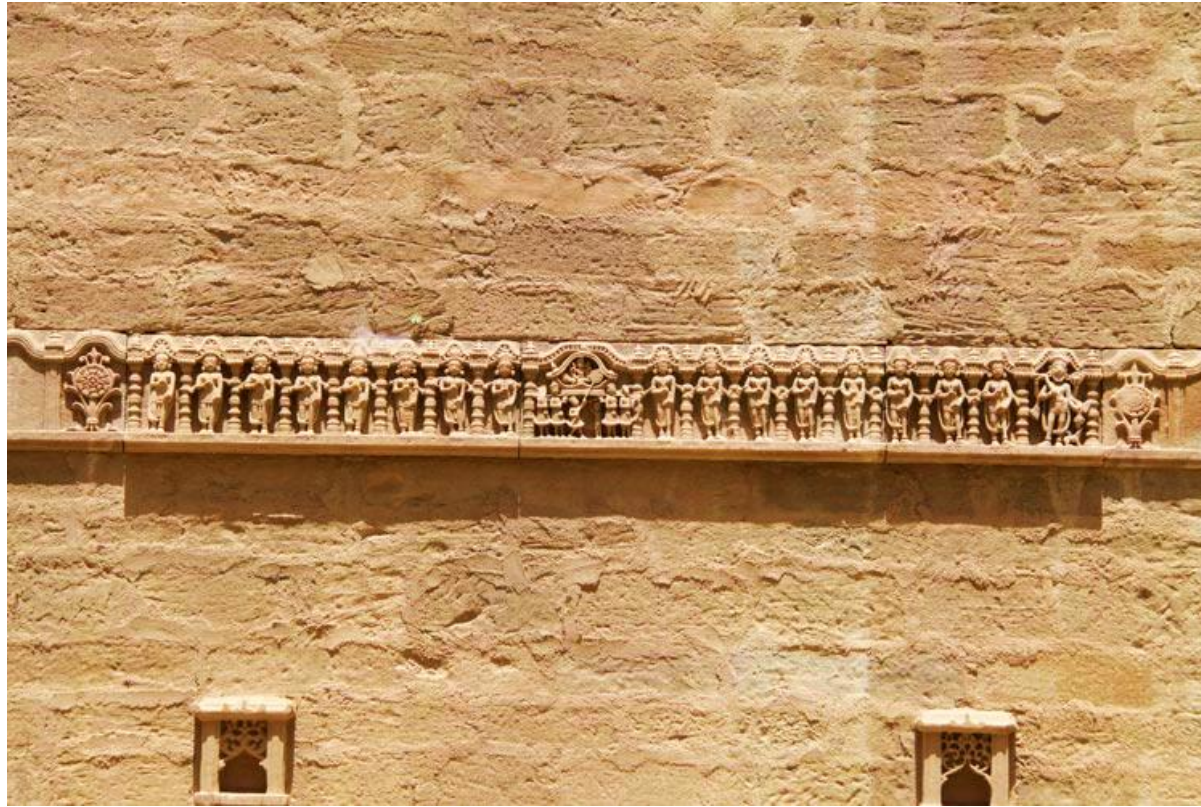






While walking down to the water one experiences a sudden calm and coolness not to be found on the road above and in the quiet, you can pause for a while to reflect on your experiences. The Ram Dhun Temple, just in front of the well.







Kutch district is famous for some of its ancient attractions. This district was in existence in ancient times of Ramayana and Mahabharat. Some reports show that it was present in the time of Lord Rama and Ravana. Ramkund stepwell is the ultimate proof that Kutch existed at that time. It is one of the very old places located at Bhuj city of Kutch.





### **Dholavira Stepwell, Bhuj**

A 5,000-year-old stepwell has been found in one of the largest Harappan cities, Dholavira, in Kutch, which is three times bigger than the Great Bath at Mohenjo Daro. The Dholavira stepwell dates back to the Bronze Age. Located in the eastern reservoir of Dholavira by experts from the Archaeological Survey of India working with IIT-Gandhinagar, the site represents the largest, grandest, and the best furnished ancient reservoir discovered so far in the country.

It's rectangular and 73.4m long, 29.3m wide, and 10m deep. It's located beneath the eastern reservoir of Dholavira. ASI says a huge lake and an ancient shoreline is buried in the site. Surveys indicate more Harappan age reservoirs and stepwells in the vicinity.





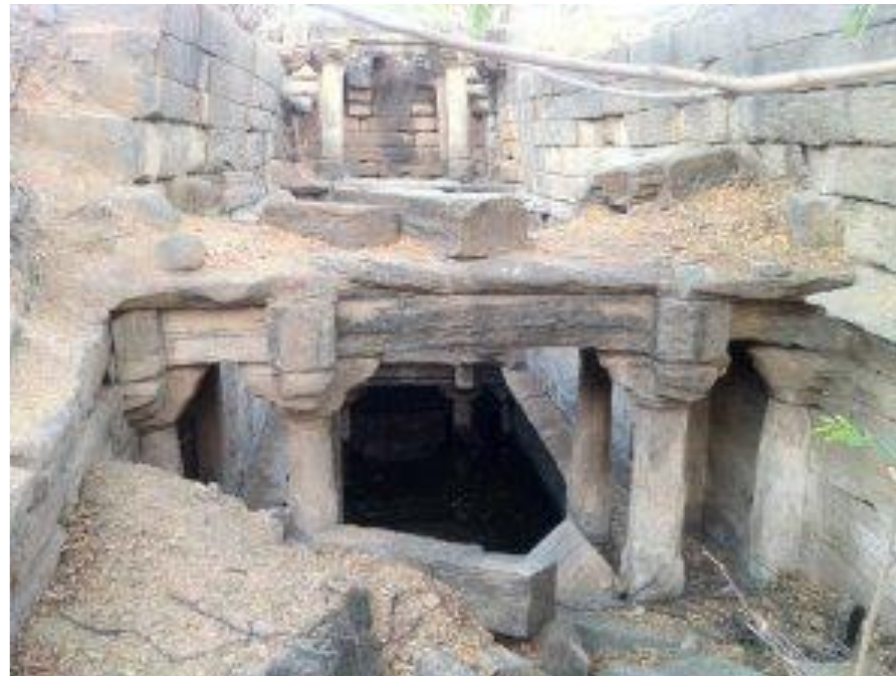
**Dholavira reservoir, Kutchh**



### **Duda Vav, Bhadreshwar, Kutch**

Bhadreshwar is a popular pilgrimage place for the Jains. It is situated on the sea-shore about 32 km. from Mundra. The Bhadreshwar Jain temple, one of the most ancient temples situated in Bhadrawati, is considered a shrine. The remains of the ancient Bhadrawati Nagari are found here. Bhadrawati was ruled by King Sidhsen in 449 B.C (according to the Hindu calendar) who renovated the place. Later it was ruled by The Solankies who were Jains, and they changed the name to Bhadreshwar. Then in 1315, a great famine struck Kutch, after which the place was renovated by Jagadusha.

Bhadreshwar - Chakhanda Mahadev Temple The grandeur of the past is reflected in buildings such as the old Masjid, the Hanuman Temple, the Duda masjid, the Hanuman temple, the Duda Vav (a step well with a lintel about 17 feet long). Duda Vav is a large and substantial though plain stepwell with a lintel about 17 feet 7 inches long by 2 feet 1 inches square. It was constructed by placing heavy blocks of stones on one another. The stepwell is now partially collapsed and is ruined. There was a dome of Shiva Temple near it in the 1850s. It was 15 feet 18 ½ inches overall and the pillars are 1 foot 4 inches long.





### **Siyot Vav, Near Siyot caves, Kutch**

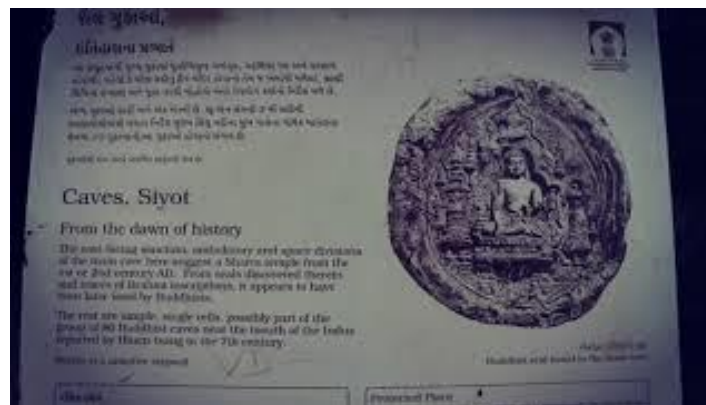
The Siyot caves, sometimes referred to as the Kateshwar Buddhhist caves, are five rock-cut caves located near Siyot village in the Lakpat Taluka of Kutch district, Gujarat, India.

The main cave has east facing sanctum, ambulatory and space divisions which suggests a Shiva temple from the first or second century. The cave was used by Buddhists later which can be concluded based on the seals found herein and the traces of Brahmi inscriptions. Other caves are simple single cells which were probably the part of eighty Buddhist caves located near the mouth of Indus river as reported by Xuanzang in seventh century.

The excavation in 1988-89 recovered clay seals engraved with Buddha images in various mudras and seals engraved with late Brahmi and Devnagari inscriptions. Other findings were copper rings, Gadhahiya coins, terracotta Nandi with bell and chain, different types of earthen wares like *Surahi*. Based on stratigraphic evidence, it is established that the site was occupied by Buddhist before it was again occupied by Shaivaites around twelfth or thirteenth century.

The site was repaired after 2001 Gujarat earthquake. There is a primitive stepwell located nearby.

The renovation is done very badly with concrete on this stepwell.





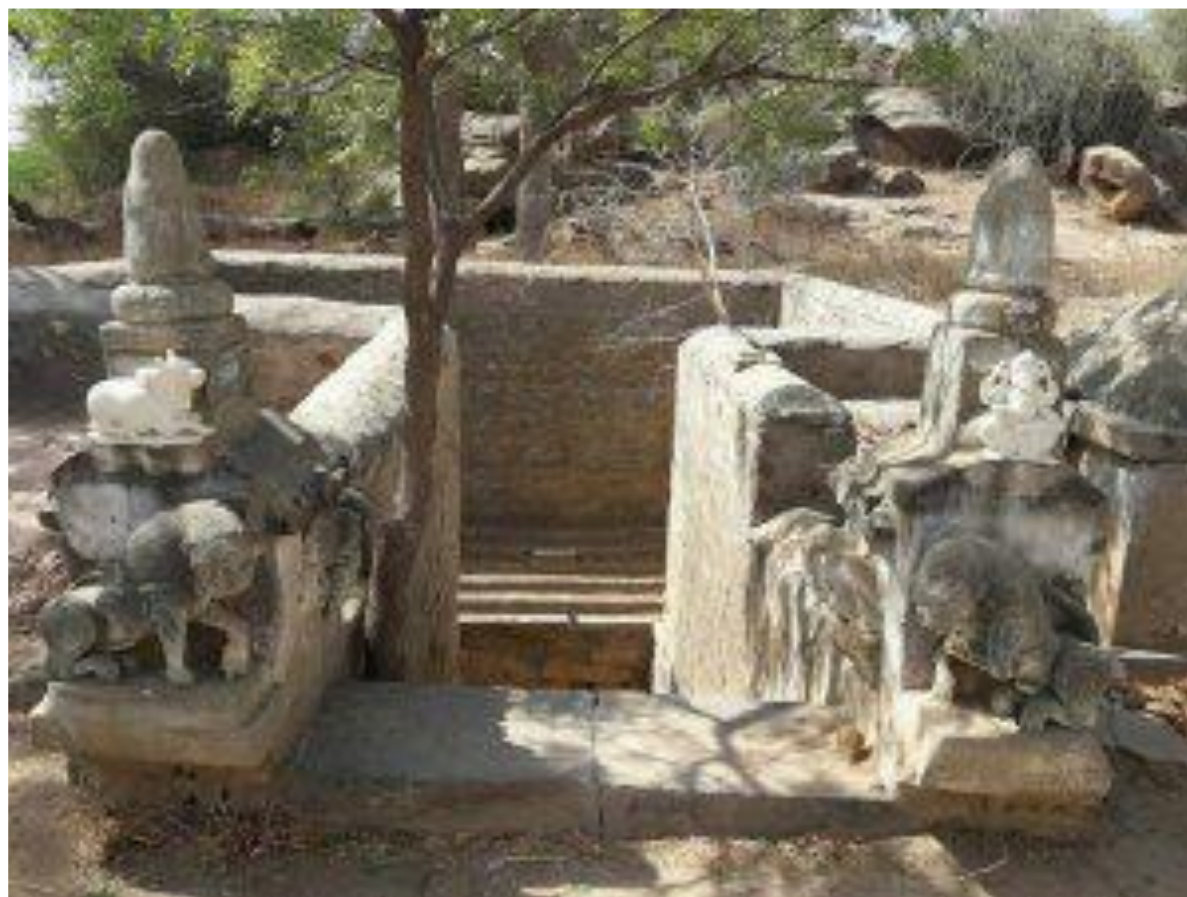
**Bhima Sethi Ni Vav (Nani Ba Nav), Bhuj, Kutch**



**Dhunai Vav, Kutch**



**Godheswar Jagri Vav, Bhutakiya, Kutch**



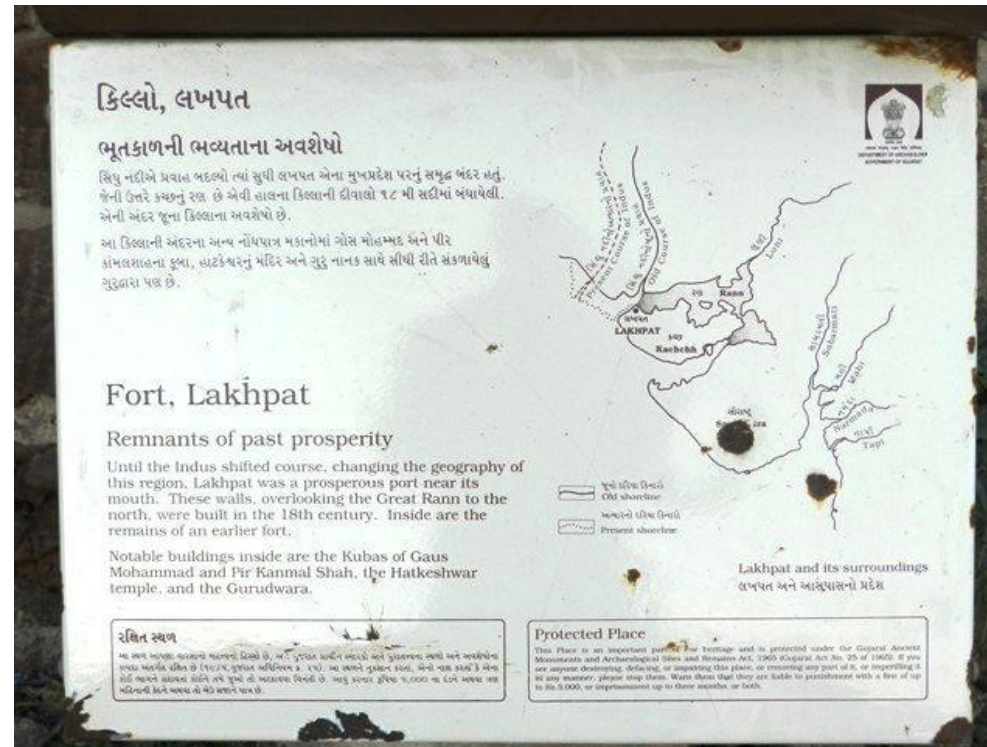


**Roha Vav, Kutch**





## Lakhpat Fort Stepwell, Kutch



At the far northwest corner of Kutch, facing north across the Great Rann towards Pakistan, stands Lakhpat, once an important port city but now virtually abandoned for almost 200 years. A place where you can imagine the rise and decline of a great port city, and simultaneously contemplate the vast emptiness of the desert and the sea.

When the 1819 earthquake sent the Indus River on its present course to the west and the Great Rann dried up, so did Lakhpat. It was left a humble town around the ruins of its former grandness, now only with Kori Creek that still flows into the Rann . The 7 km fort walls, erected in 1801 by Jamadar Fateh Muhammed, are still nearly intact, and offer tremendous views out over the Rann.

Lakhpat has religious significance for three of India's most populous religions: Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, reportedly camped here on his journey to Mecca. The site later became a gurudwara, which holds some of Nanak's possessions; Pir Ghaus Muhammed, a Sufi mystic who from the age of twelve devoted himself to spiritual practice and reportedly practiced half as a Hindu and half as a Muslim, is buried here in Lakhpat. His tomb is a stone construction with very complex carvings and stepwell that is said to have healing properties for skin problems; Sayyed Pir Shah's nine-domed mausoleum has intricate carvings, doors, windows and jaalis.







### **Southern reservoir I, Dholavira, Kutch**

Dholavira, in Kutch where excavations have been carried out since 1990 is the most recent of the sites from the Indus Civilisation and is said to have flourished over 4,500 years ago. Findings reveal the existence of a well-planned water system and a water tank built of stone. According to Bisht who carried out these excavations, there once existed more than 16 reservoirs in Dholavira, which were sophisticated devices to collect and store rainwater



**Eastern Reservoir 2, Dholavira, Kutchh**



**Southern Reservoir 2, Dholavira, Kutch**



An example of the curative power of water is the popular belief that anyone with an earache who made offerings of *ghee* in the stepwell known as Malanvar in Kutch would be cured of the pain. Consequently, *ghee* stains can be found all the way down to the water and those seeking a cure light lamps and make offerings.

**Brahma Kund, Prabhas Patan**



Near Halvad in Surendranagar district, there is a village named Sundarei where the goddess Sundari is the patron deity of several communities, namely the Koli boatmen, Kapol Vaniya, Sorathia Vaniya, and Kanodia Brahmins. In ancient times, Sundari was a well known port and sailors travelled from here to distant places. There are temples dedicated to this deity in Prabhas Patan and Vallabhipura (Pathak, 1997, p. 214).



**Vayad ( Vagad ) Vav, Patan**

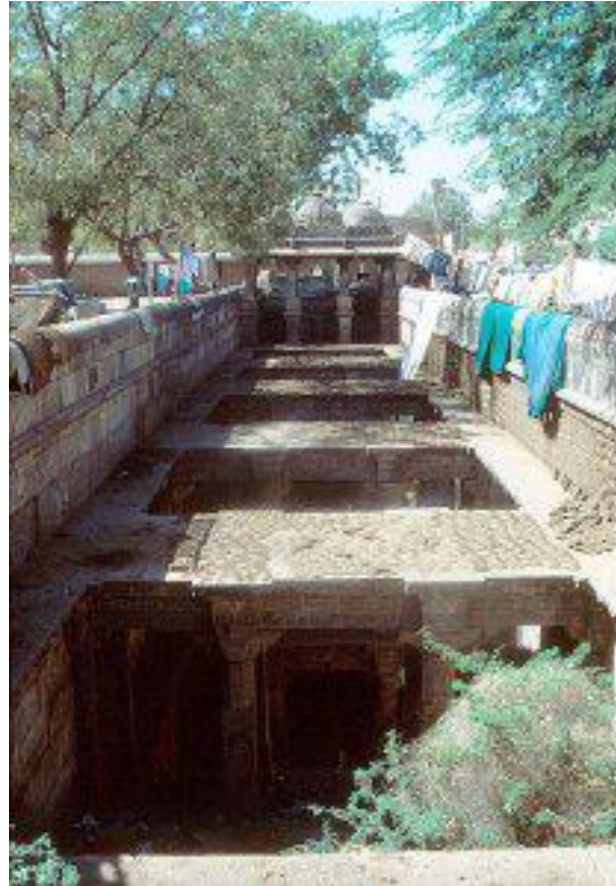


Another example comes from the city of Patan. According to popular lore, many years ago, the residents of this city utilised the waters of the stepwell of Patan to treat a variety of ailments such as cough and whooping cough. They drilled tiny holes in the stones found scattered around the stepwell and tied them around the neck of the children for protection and made offerings of *ghee* lamps to propitiate the spirits (Valand, 2000, p. 21). Similarly, the wells near Ramdorana and the Bahmania well near Vasawad are credited with curing coughs, while the Pipli well near Talawad is known to alleviate digestive problems (Masani, 1918, p. 55).

The waters of some wells and stepwells were believed to cure a variety of ailments – from cough to skin diseases (See Chapter 8 on folklore).

It is evident that the healing and curative powers residing in the waters of the wells caused them to be venerated. Various types of offerings were made at the wells which include sweets, sugar, honey, betel nuts, flowers, milk and coconuts. As sacred sites, the wells were covered with *jalis* or trellis work and illuminated with ghee lamps. It is a common practice all over India to install *dhajas* or flags near temples, religious buildings, shrines, pilgrimage sites and sacred trees. This was also the case with certain wells and stepwells which were said to be the abode of deities or spirits (ibid., pp. 104–05).

**Barot Vav, also called Trikambarot Vav and Bahadursingh  
Vav, Patan**



**Naliya Trpan Selor vav, Dadampar, Kutch**

The waters of certain stepwells were regarded as especially sacred and beneficial. The cool and sweet water of the Selor stepwells was said to have greater sanctity than visiting a temple







Naliya Dhamani Selor vav, Kutch



**Naliya Dhodo Talav Selor vav, Kutch**



### **Adesar Vav, Kutch**

On the outskirts of the village of Adesar is a stepwell known to the locals as Fuli vav. There is an inscription in the stepwell which recounts the courage and patriotism of the queen. It states that once the stepwell was outside the fort. The ruler of Kutch invaded Adesar when its ruler was out of town. His queen immediately began preparations to defend her kingdom and, with the help of her subjects, built a fortress around the well within one single night to ensure that the enemy would not be able to obtain water from it. The intelligence and courage of the queen forced the Kutch invader to retreat. This account is narrated in the inscription.

It can be inferred from the inscription that in the beginning this stepwell was known as 'Rangvav'; later it was referred to as Fuli vav. It is possible it gets its name from the word phul or flower because its waters may have been used for the flower garden. One can see in the stepwell sculptures of ascetics, animals, birds, wrestlers and water carriers



**Palasava Vav, Palasava, Kutchh**





### **Kanthkot Fort Stepwell, Kutch**

The Kanthkot Fort was erected in the middle of the 8th century. This fort is known to have been conquered by many rulers. It was the capital of the Kathis until the Chavdas became the new rulers of this fort. It is believed that a part of the wall of the Kanthkot Fort had crossed the fireplace of the great ascetic, Kanthadnath. Kanthadnath became furious and reacted by ruining the wall. In an attempt to pacify the ascetic, the builders had named this fort after the name of the ascetic.

The Kanthkot Fort is based on the local architecture of the 8th century. Characteristically, this fort is huge and is made up of massive blocks of bricks and stones. The walls of the fort are mended in many places by smaller stones. It is known that with time these bricks and stones have strengthened. This fort has three small gates and one big gate.

This fort houses the remains of three temples within it. These three temples are Kanthadnath, a Jain temple and a Sun temple. Kanthadnath temple is situated on the west point of the fort. It is a domed structure which is known to be built in 1820 by Deda Jadejas. It has four pillars supporting a fine domed porch.

Interior of the temple is adorned by a white marble image of Kanthadnath, sitting cross-legged. Prior to Kanthadnath, a much larger temple existed at its place. It is considered to be the work of Mod Samma (1270). In 1819, this temple was destroyed by an earthquake in the Rann of Kutch. The old Jain temple had a mandap or a hall which was provided with double entrances. This temple was dedicated to Lord Mahavira. There is much discrepancy regarding the builders of this temple. According to a piece of writing on a pillar in the entrance hall dated 1283 (Samvat 1340) Atmadevnath's sons, Lakha and Sohi are the

builders of this temple. On a contrary, according to a piece of writing on a pilaster in the screen on the outside Atmadev's son, Pasil is the builder of this temple. It is also believed that the family who has built the Jain temple is the relatives of Jagdusha of Bhadresar. The old Sun temple is stone's throw from the Jain temple. This temple was dedicated to Surya or the Sun god and still has His image along with a male and female attendant on each side. The Kathis used to worship god Surya. In fact, Surya was their favorite Lord. But it is known that the image looks similar to the Hindu god, Vishnu. Other occupants of this temple are a more modern shrine on the wall and a series of successive plinths, shaped round or square, which supports a ling on top. Also, a piece of writing praising Rudra, an incarnation of Lord Shiva, is housed in this temple. But these praises are considered to be incorrectly summed up together.

Ancient wells also exist in Kanthkot fort. Two large wells of considerable depth and one dilapidated stepwell, built of blocks of sandstone, are located in the west of the fort, more specifically in a ravine. One of these wells is called Bhamario and another is named as Nogan. The former is about 76m deep and has a diameter of about 12 feet. The latter is 63m deep and has a diameter of about 1 foot.



**Ratba Vav , Rajbai Vav , Rampara, Surendranagar**

This stepwell in Vadhvan, situated between the villages of Rampura and Ratba, contains a stepwell which has four inscriptions dating to 1482 C.E. According to the inscriptions, in the reign of Mahmud Begada, during the rule of Jhala King Rana Vaghji, a resident of Jhinjuvada, Sheth Veena of the Srimala caste and his two wives Ranibai and Valhadé commissioned the well for the welfare of the people



In its architectural details, Ratala stepwell resembles the Madha Stepwell, Vadhavan, Even this stepwell has six pavilion towers and one additional entrance pavilion which has collapsed now. The breadth of the stepped corridors decreases at the pavilions. The pyramidal tapering roofing over the pavilions is ornamented in recessed horizontal rows with geometrical patterns. The sculpture of Seshashayi Vishnu is very interesting because of its having a row of nine planets ( Navagraha) on top. The pediment of the niche resembles those of the Dada Harir stepwell, because of its arch like shape and chain and pot motif.

**Rajsitapur Vav, Surendranagar**





**Dhandhalpur Vav, Surendranagar**



### **Ganga Vav, Vadhavan, Surendranagar**

The Ganga stepwell is situated in the town of Vadhvan like the Madha stepwell. It is located to the eastern side of the town, outside the ancient city walls. A temple is adjacent to it.

It is smaller in size and plainer in its ornamentation, as compared to the Madha Stepwell. The Ganga Stepwell has three pavilion towers which are crowned by a tapering pyramidal roofing made of horizontal tiers. It is laid out in an east west direction, the well; being in the west and the entrance in the east. The pavilions are oblong structures in between four pilasters. The tapering roof does not cover the whole mandapa like Madha and Ratala stepwells, but only the square part above the pillars. The mandapa in the first kuta is embellished with a niche on each side; which is topped by an elaborate ilika pediment, the central part of which is dominated by a water pot (lota) hanging down from a chain. Each wave of the ilika framing is resting on a miniature-pilaster. The niches are empty at present, but the depiction of trishula (the symbol for Goddess Durga) is painted in white into the bay of one niche. The spaces in between the pints are filled with two eyes, similar motif as carved in one of the adalaj stepwell niche.

Ganga Vav has an inscription mentioning the date of Samvat 1225, corresponding to 1169. Because of the style of the pediments and the architectural structure, this date could be attributable to the construction of Ganga Stepwell.





**Madha Vav, Surendranagar, Wadhwan, Gujarat**

Madha stepwell is located inside the ancient part of the Vadhvan town at the Western side. It is said that it derives its name from one of the ministers of the Vaghela overlord, Karna Vaghela named Madha who had built this stepwell. Madha was a Nagar Brahmin and it is believed that his and his wife's statue are still found in the stepwell. According to local belief, a ghost is haunting the Madha stepwell who demands a human victim every third year by drowning in the well water.

A short inscription under the sculpture indicates that construction belongs to the late Vaghela period under the ruler Karnadeva Vaghela. The Madha stepwell is 55 m long. It has six pavilion towers and six flights of stairs, which is an unusual number. It is laid in the east west direction. A specific feature of this well is the tapering roof over each kuta which is made up of narrow horizontal tiers in ogee moulding, this feature brings Ratba stepwell in close relationship with Madha.

The stepped corridor is 49.80 m long. Its breadth decreases at each pavilion. It is at the flights of stairs 6m broad and at pavilions 3.60m. The thick walling at the pavilion seems to be necessary as a supporting structure as the distance between one pavilion and the other is 4.80m which is rather large. A section through the stepped corridor reveals a tapering plan. The stepped corridor is approached by a separate narrow staircase which is attached to its front.

The pavilions in the kuta are small cells in between four pilasters. The roofing over each Kuta has a slight convex shape and is built of nine horizontal lines with ogee moulding. The roofing is crowned by a finial which has the shape of an amalaka and purna kalas made of one stone block. These two normally form the topmost part of a sikhara of a North Indian temple. Some mandapa are embellished with niches.

The well is 5.30m in diameter. Six struts are introduced in the last storey. The four at the back wall are covered with a stone lintel over which the arrangement for hauling up water by buckets was fixed.





The screen is divided into two parts forming the walls to the two side of the first kuta. Each side of the screen is framed by a vertical pilaster like beam and horizontal lintel with a row of hansa ( geese). The square section are either covered with geometrical or floral patterns, in some cases figural ornamentation are set into these patterns which are , however in dilapidated condition.

The niches are located inside the pavilions, in the bays behind the pilasters, and before the pavilions at the landing of the staircase. The niches are framed with torana motif.





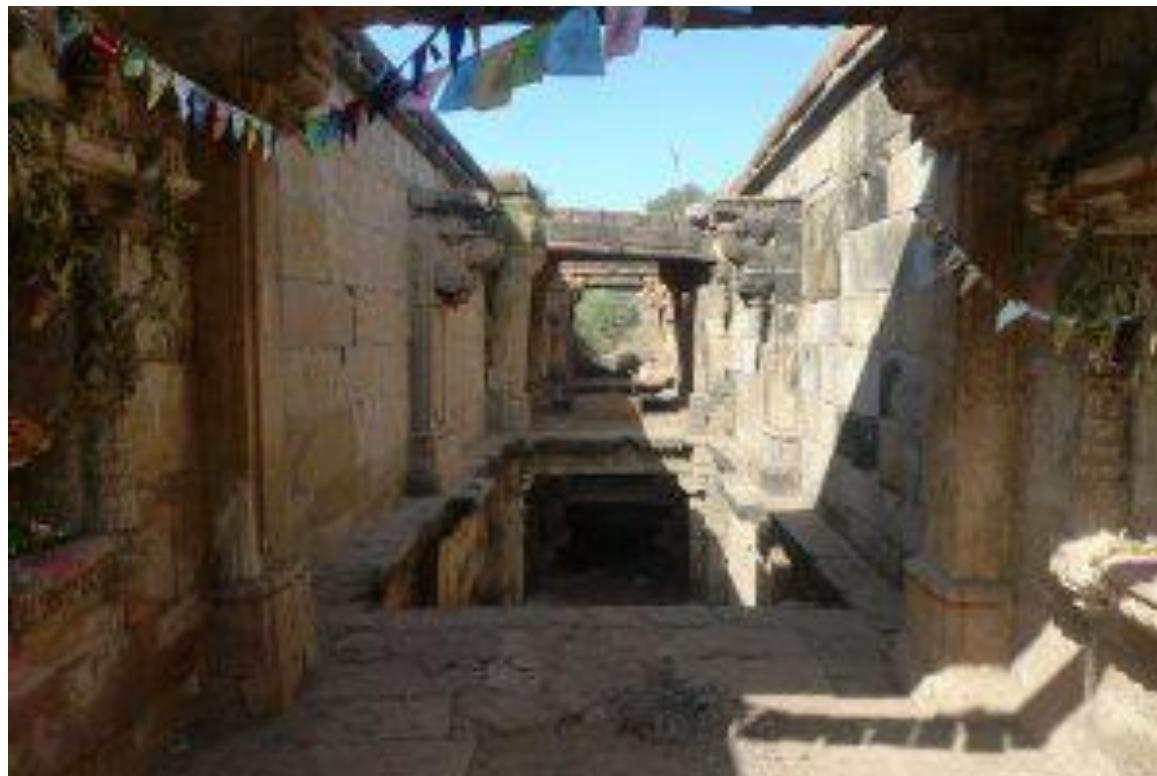


In the niches sculptures of Bhairava, Dasavatara, Saptamatrka, Navgraha and of a couple are recognisable. The rest of the sculptures are in such dilapidated condition that their identification is difficult. The brackets are decorated with leaf and scroll designs, whereas the cornice on top bears in each case a miniature sculpture depicting either a godly figure in sitting or standing posture, or an erotic maithuna scene. The short inscription underneath a sculpture mentions the date corresponding to AD 1294. The major part of the ornamental details in this stepwell are in the style of late Vaghela period in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century.





**Hampur Stepwell, Surendranagar**



Hampur is a village in Dhrangadhra taluka of Surendranagar district. The stepwell is located Being situated close to the town of Dhrangadhara, Hampur Village, which was probably under the rule of Jhala Rajputs of Dhrangadhara.

The stepwell is laid out in the north-south direction, the entrance being in the south and the well in the north. The entrance to the stepped corridor is marked by pavilion standing on a raised platform which is reached by some steps on three sides, the fourth leading down to the corridor. The corridor is divided by five pavilion towers and four intermediate supporting frameworks. The part of the corridor around the fourth pavilion tower and third supporting framework is broken, displaying a large pit strewn with stone blocks, now filled with water. The stepwell supplies fresh water and is filled up to the first storey after the rainy season.

The stepped corridor is narrow and elongated, and therefore has to be supported by the pavilion towers and the intermediate frameworks. On the eastern side at the fifth kuta, there is a spiral staircase leading down to lower storeys.

The entrance pavilion has a half spherical dome which is resting on twelve pillars, eight of which mark the corners of an internal octagonal plan, the four additional ones making the outside square platform. The half spherical dome has collapsed.

The water pulling, channelling and storage systems are still intact. The receptacle for the water at the western end of the well is connected with a channel passing over the well itself leading the water into large oblong through at the western side. The niches in the first kuta embellish the monument with purnaghata motif, which is carved with small elongated vase, a full blown lotus flower and connecting chain. The plainness in the entrance pavilion is broken by a narrow band of geometrical flower design arranged in small squares on top of horizontal connecting lintel pillars like Dada Harir Stepwell, Ahmedabad. There is no inscription and sculptural ornamentation, so date of construction can only be surmised from its architectural style. Therefore the structure could be dated to the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

**Dedadara, Gangvo Kund, Ganga Stepped Pond, Surendranagar**



**Matri Vav, Kankavati, Surendranagar**

The Matri stepwell is located in Kankavati village of Surendranagar Districts. It has all the features of a stepwell proper, except that the stepped corridor is not built underground, but on the bed of the lake and is at times fully submerged in water. The name of the stepwell is locally given, because it is supposed to have an image of Matri, the mother goddess inside the lower storeys. The Matri stepwell is laid out in an east west direction, the well; being in the west and the entrance in the eastern end.

The reason for constructing as stepwell on a lake might be a provision for times of drought. When the water in the lake has dried up completely, it is still possible that the well, the bottom of which reaches below the level of the lake, would supply enough water.





**Nakhti Vav, Surendranagar**



**Nag Bava Vav, Dharangadhra, Surendranagar**

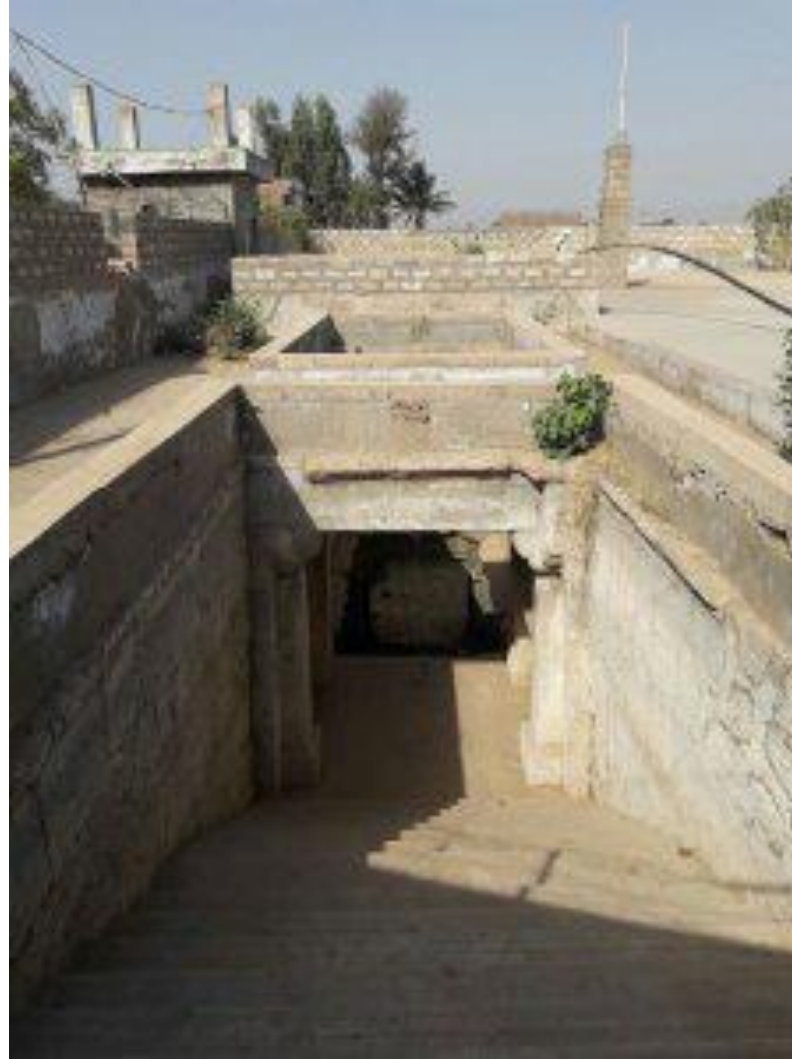




The Naga Bava stepwell is laid out in a north south direction. The entrance being in the northern and the well in the southern end. On the western side of the entrance, there is small shrine of Siva, inside which there is an inscription in old Gujarati language in devanagari script, which mentions the date of completion as the year corresponding to A.D 1503.

The stepwell is built entirely of large stone blocks which are fitted together with mortar.

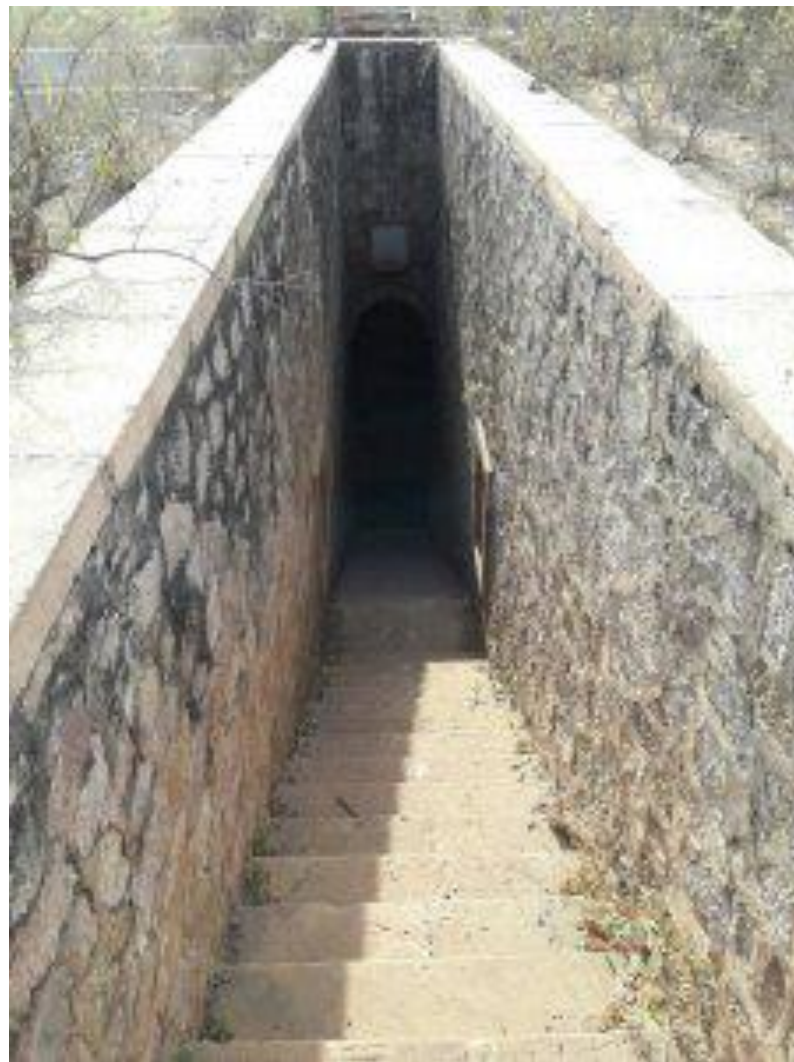
**Alark Vav, Muli, Surendranagar**





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**Rampara Vav, Rampura, Surendranagar**



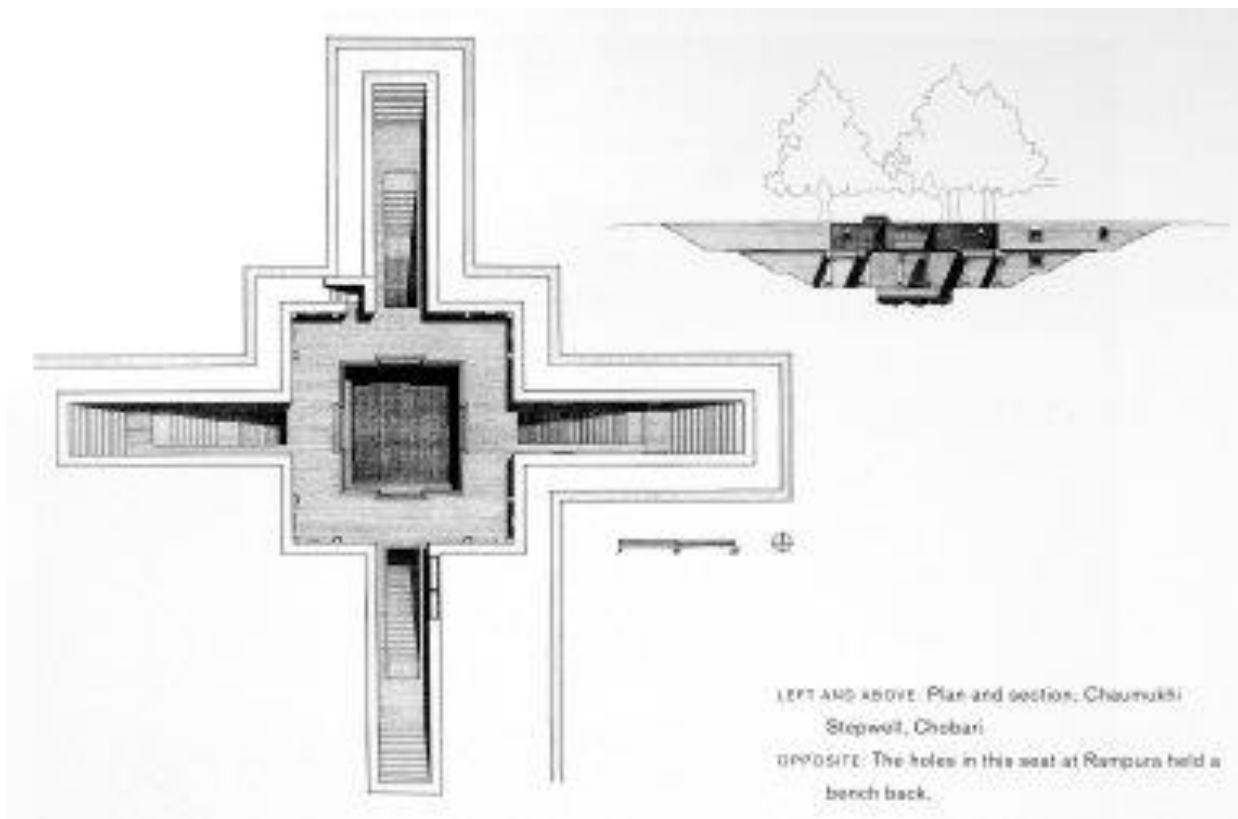
**Chaumukhi Vav, Chobari, Surendranagar**





Chaumukhi stepwell is situated in southern outskirts outside Chobari village in Chotila taluka of Surendranagar District. From the architectural point of view, this stepwell is extremely important, its ground plan is constructed like a regular cross with four entrances, as the name indicates ( chaumukhi- chaturmukhi). It corresponds to the fourth class of the classical description of stepwells. Named Vijaya. The well itself is in the middle of the structure, where four arms of the cross meet. The point is broadened at square. The lintels are decorated with a row of geese. The walls of the pool and of the stepped corridors have niches, which have images of Saptamatrka, Mahisasuramadrini, sheshashayi, and other images of Vishnu and Shiva.





**Pandarva Vav, Surendranagar**



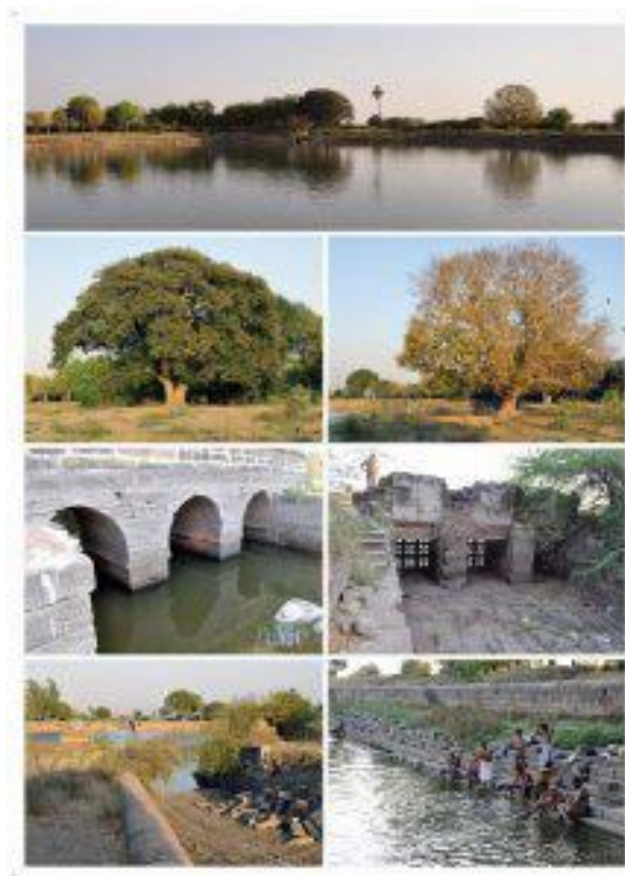
**Lakhu Vav, Vadhvan, Surendranagar**



**Koyal Mata Mandir Ni Vav, Dasada, Surendranagar**



**Chandrasar Lake well, Pratappur, Surendranagar**





**Varsingpur Vav, Junagadh**



**Revati Kund, Junagadh**



**Khorasa Vav, Junagadh**



**Mangrol Vav,Mangrol, Junagadh**





**Danvavirdada Mandir Vav, Sihor , Junagadh**



**Bhana Vav, Vanthali, Junagadh**



**Suryakund, Vanthali, Junagadh**



**Bhalka tirtha , Bhalka, Somnath, Junagadh**



**Kodinar Vav, Junagadh**





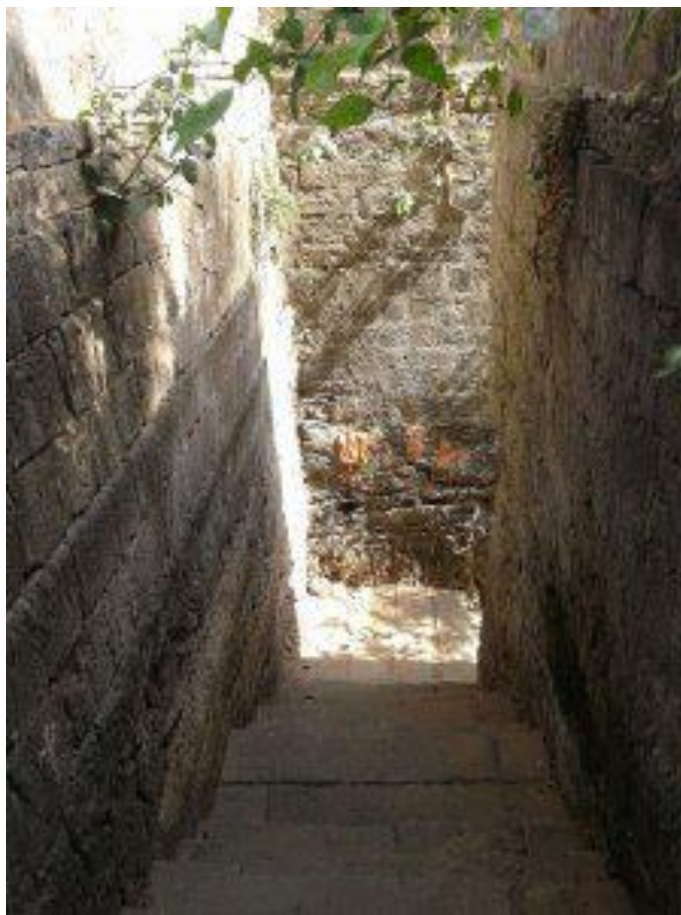
**Gadoi Vavli, Junagadh Uperkot Fort Vav, Junagadh**



**Swaminarayan Temple Vav, Mangrol, Junagadh**



**Kindarva Vav, Junagadh**



**Ghadiyali Kuvo, Jamnagar, Lakhota Pond**



**Shani Mandir Vav, Hathla, Jamnagar**



**Jetha or jethava Ni Vav, Ghumli, Jamnagar**



Jetha stepwell is situated in the vicinity of the Vikia stepwell in the Barda Hills. It is in a dilapidated condition. An inscription was found near the entrance mentioning a date of Samvat 1383, corresponding to ad 1326-27.

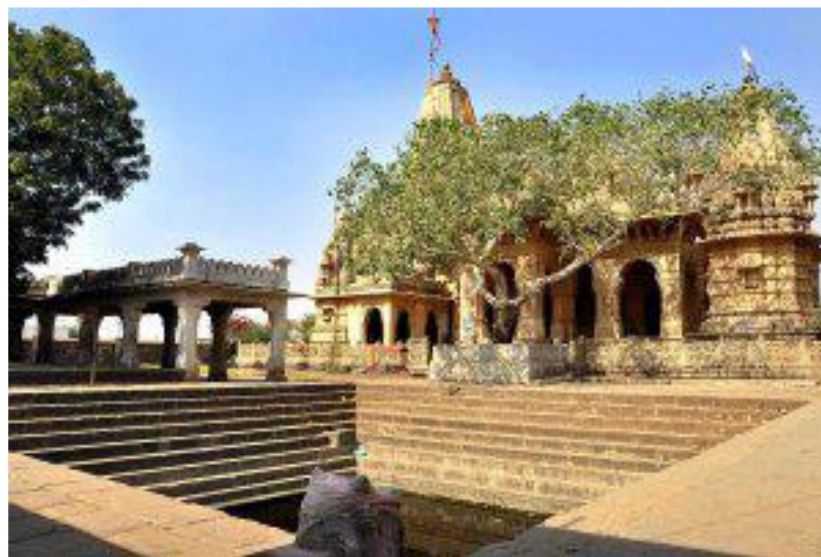
The architectural setting, the proportion of length and breadth of stepped corridor, the structure of the pavilion towers, the formation of the mandapa and the ornamentation of the brackets, is similar to that of Vikia stepwell.

Mahadev temple Vav, dwarka, Jamnagar

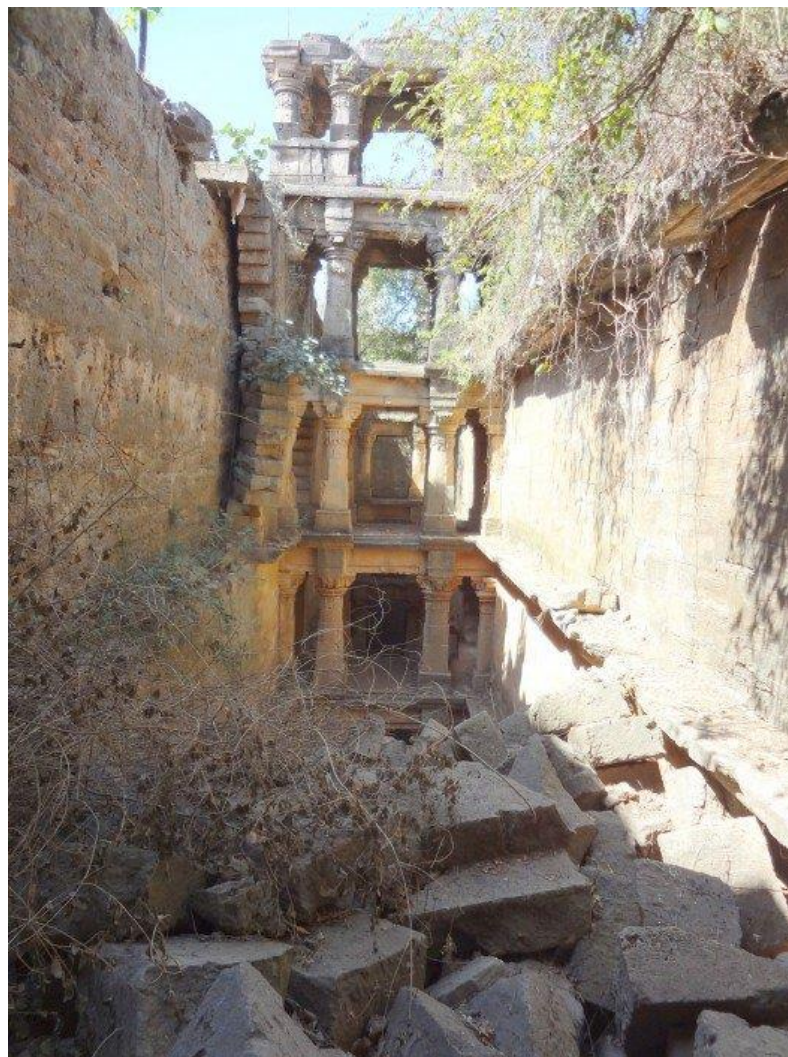




**Rafaleshwar, Shiva temple tank, Morbi**



**Vikia Stepwell**



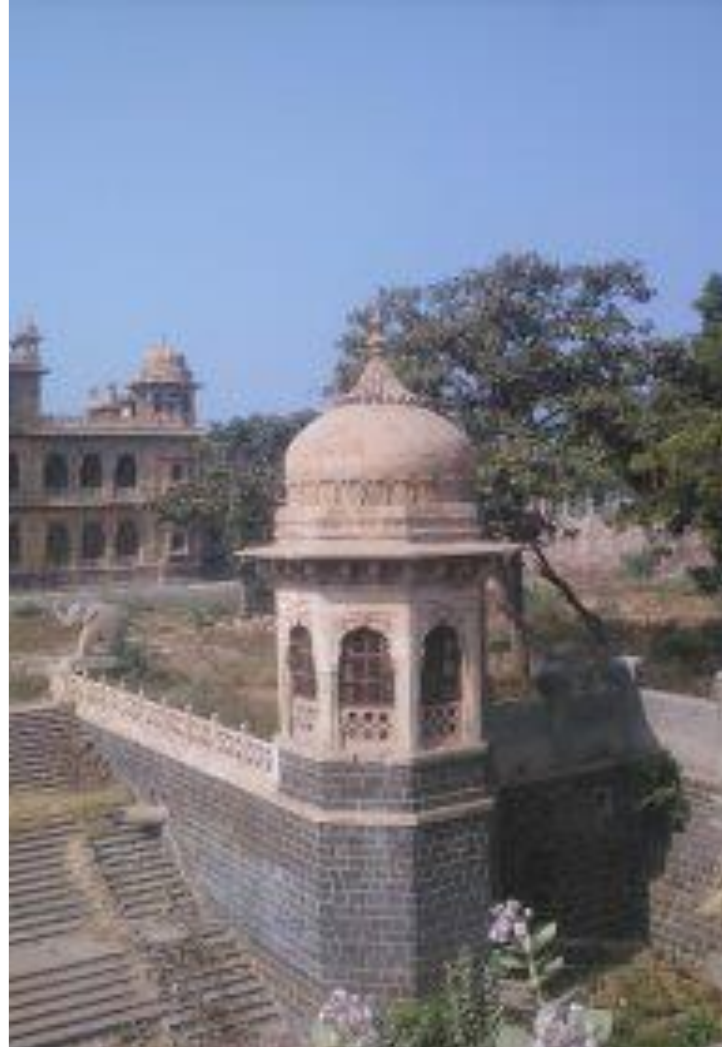


**Charavada Village , Morbi**

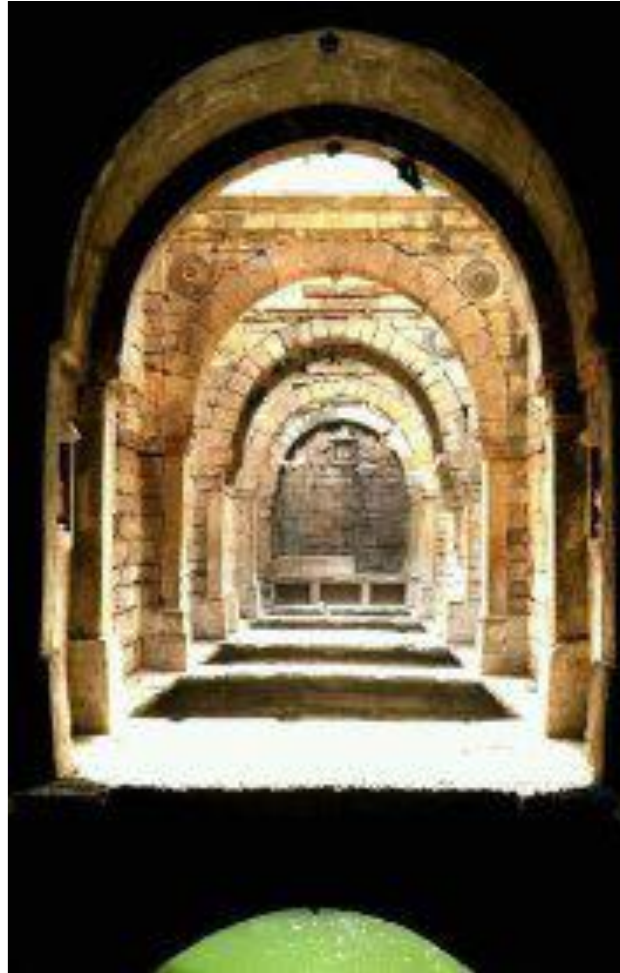




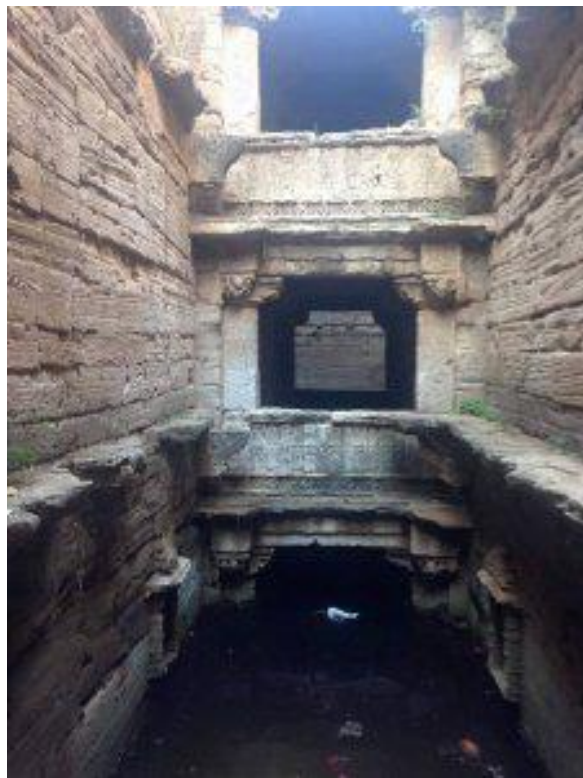
**Moni Mandir Palace Stepkund, Morbi, Rajkot**



**Jiva Mehta Stepwell ( Kuber Vav), Morbi, Rajkot**



**Bhadla, Geli Ambe Mandir Vav (Gelmata Ni Vav), Rajkot**

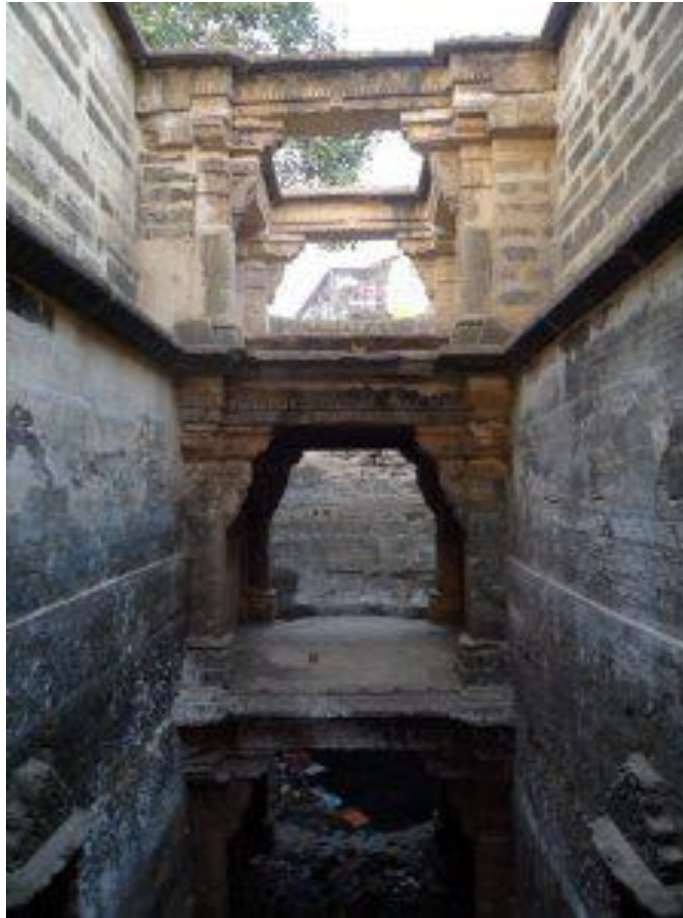


**Halvad, Sharneshwar Mahadev Temple Vav, Rajkot**





Virpur, Minal Vav, Rajkot



Virpur, is a town in Gondal taluka of the Rajkot District. It is situated on the ancient military and trade route from northern Gujarat to the pilgrim centre of Somnath, Patan. The stepwell is located in the middle of town of Virpur.

This is in a dilapidated condition. It had originally three pavilion towers. The entrance staircase is broader than the stepped corridor itself. Only few sculptures in the niches are recognisable; a sitting figure of Bhairava with a damaru and a deer in his raised hands and of Sheshashayi Vishnu, whom village girls regarded to be an image of Minaldevi, the patron goddess of this stepwell, having a child on her lap ( the lotus of Vishnu) and a woman in pregnancy nearby.

Minal stepwell can be dated to 13<sup>th</sup> century due to its close relationship with Madha stepwell architecture (the jali pediments over the small niches, the ilika pediments over the bigger niches, the pilasters of parikram, the chadya topping them with pair of hansas in the middle, the brackets, stambhika and honeysuckle motifs on the lintels of the mandapa)

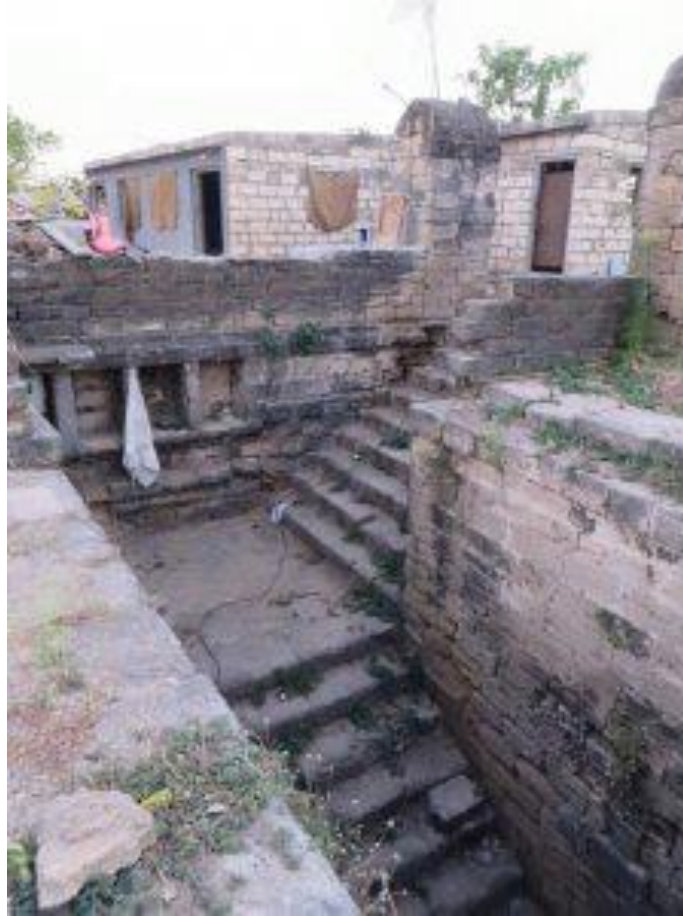
**Manjushri Vav, Dhank, Rajkot**



**Jhilani Vav, Dhank, Rajkot**



**Vayadi Ni Vav (Bochavdi Vav), Dhank-Jal road, Rajkot**





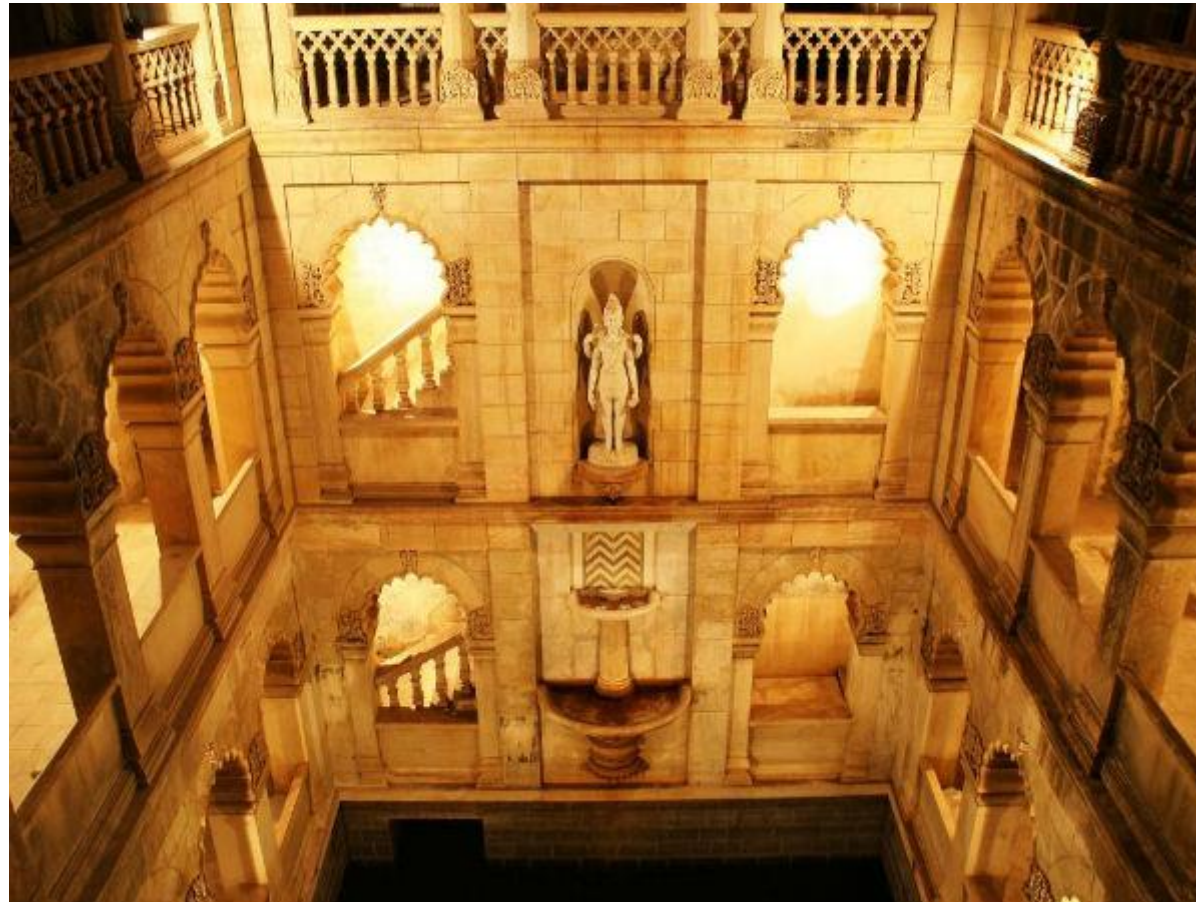
**Baghi Vav, Rajkot**



**Wankaner Palace Stepwell, Rajkot**

The Wankaner Palace is an example of how well a heritage structure can be preserved. The palace now has been converted into a heritage stay and has been renamed as the Royal Oasis Hotel. This beautiful palace is home to an early 20th century stepwell which too has been restored to its former glory and can be

seen. The stepwell is completely built of sandstone which is found locally; the entire surface however is covered with plates of white marble. The ground plan of this well comprises the rectangular shaft of the well and a surrounding passage.



The entire well is built over with a place like edifice, the middle of which is occupied by the well and covered with glass, in order to let sufficient light through.

The oblong well measures 8m by 10m, whereas the surrounding passage is 2.5m broad. At the western side in the second storey underground, passage broadens into a large hall. The surrounding passage descends for three storeys, where the water level of the well usually stands. Arched windows pierce the passage in order to enable a view of the well. The balcony is of a semi octagonal ground plan and covered with a dome which is resting on four pillars and two pilasters. It is extending from the second to the third storey underground. Opposite this balcony, a niche is let into the wall, which contains a standing image of Shiva. From Shiva's matted hair, a fountain of water is issuing forth, in imitation of the classical iconography of Shiva having the river Ganga flowing down his head. Beneath the sculpture of Shiva, there are two fountain basins, where the overflowing water forms water curtains.

**Sarvar Vav, Rajkot**

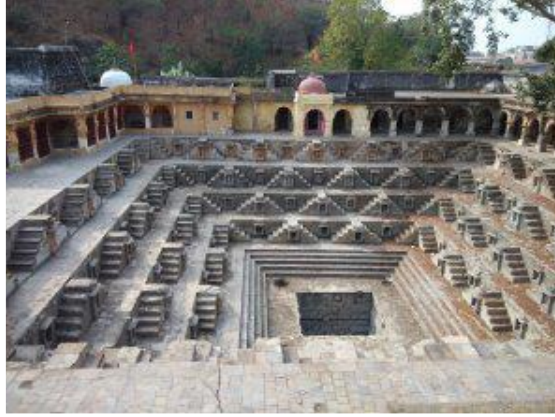


**Rola Vav, Valsad**

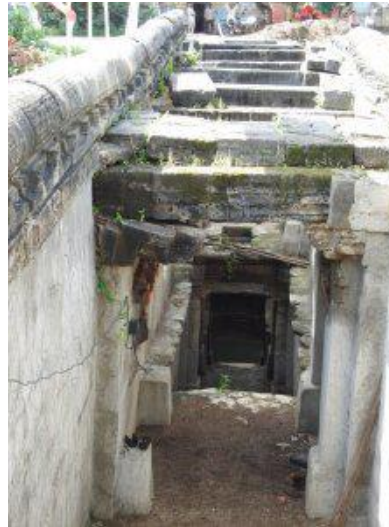




**Brahma Kund, Bhavnagar**



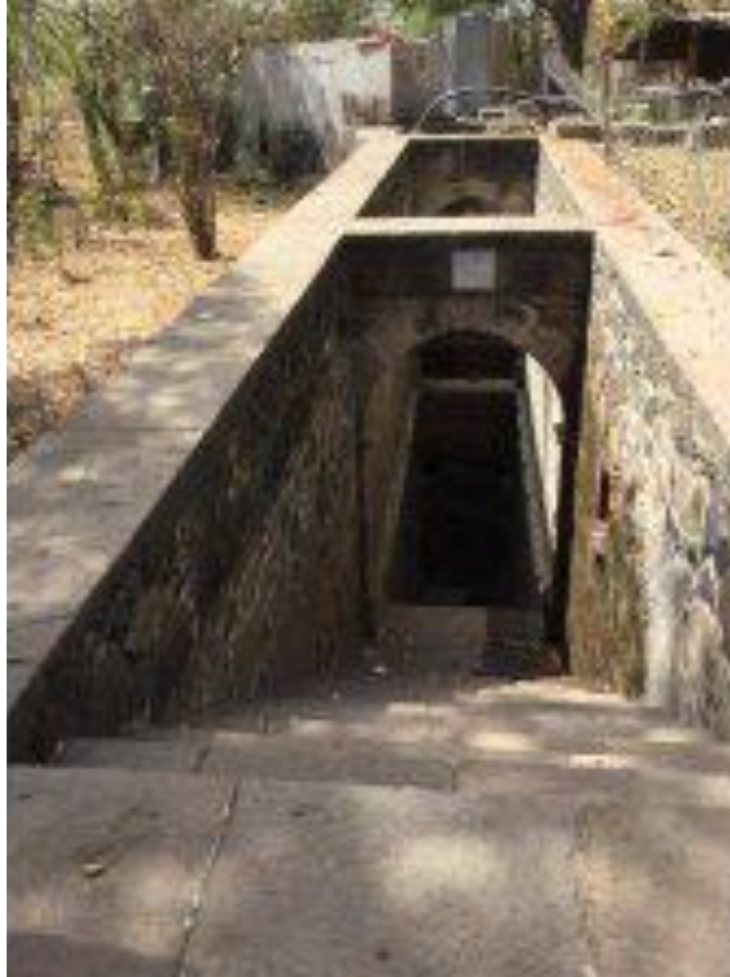
**Vejodari Vav, Bhavnagar**



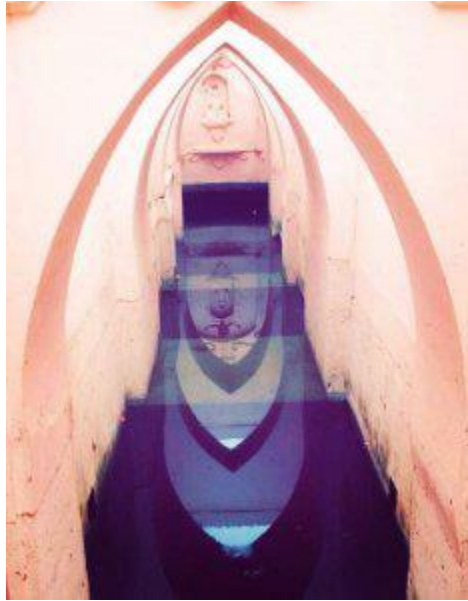
**Bhandaria Vay, Bhandaria, Bhavnagar**



**Ganga Vav, Nesvad, Bhavnagar**



**Kapileshwar Mahadev Mandir Vav, Navsari, Sarona**

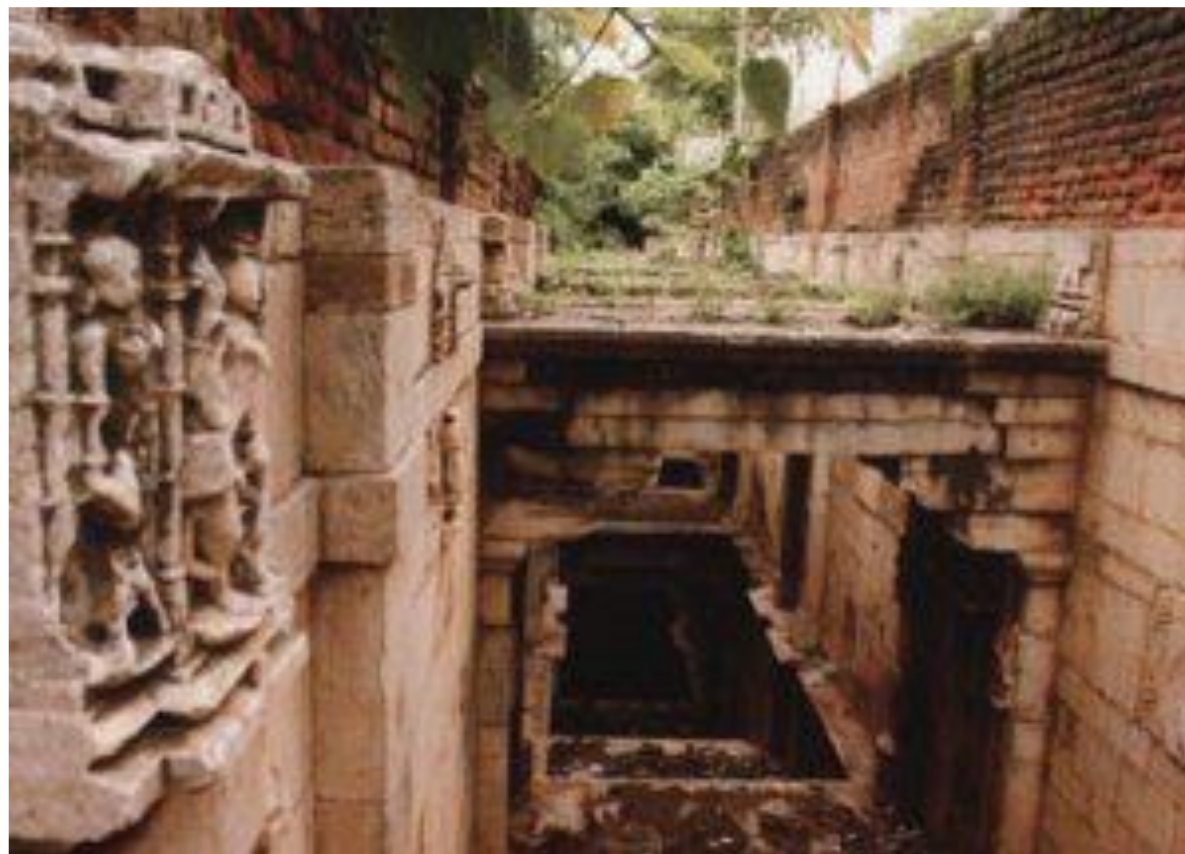




**Bhaloti Vav , Navsari**



**Mithi Vay, Palanpur, Banaskantha**



Mansarovar, Banaskantha , Ambaji



**Charamodhan Vav, Gopi Talav, Surat**



**Khammavati Vav, Naliya Sheri, Lal Darwaja, Surat**





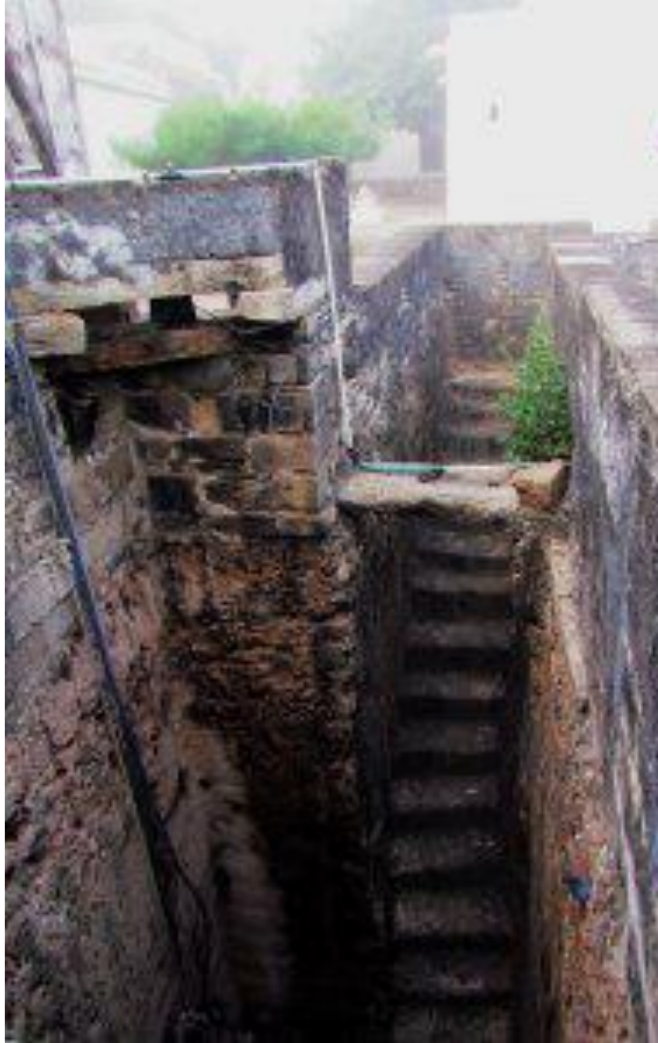
**Lakhi Vav, Katargam Gate, Surat**



**Visavada, Gnan Vav (Jnan Vav), Porbandar**



**Khimeshwar Mahadev Temple stepwell, Kuchhadi,,Porbander**



**Pujari Vav, Kutiyana, Porbander**



**Dant Vav, Datrana Porbander**

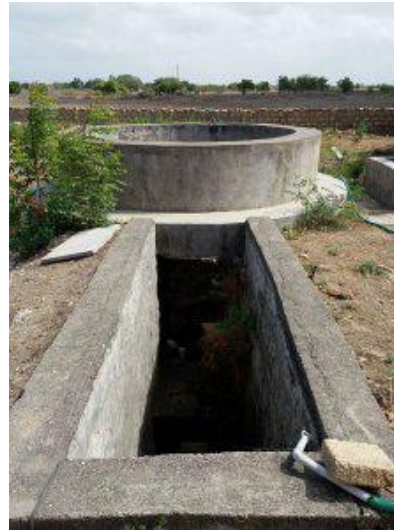




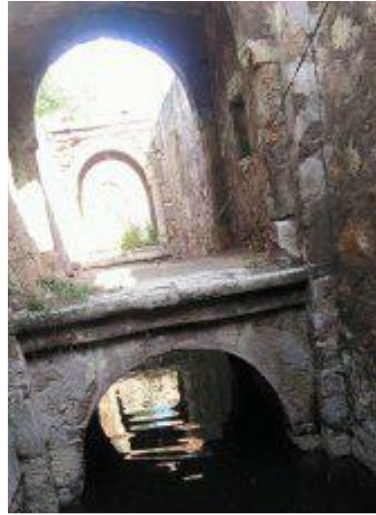
**Miyanu, Ancient Kund,12<sup>th</sup> Century, Porbander**



**Nandeshwar Mahadev temple, Porbandar**



**KunkaVav, Hathila Vav, Amreli**



**Pipavav, Amreli**



**Moti Vav, Arjansukh, Amreli**



**Lathi, Shahgaura Vav, Amreli**



**Radha Vav, Gadhada, Amreli**





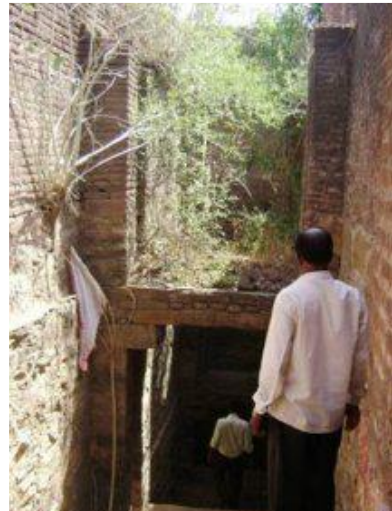
**Dhareshwar, Mahadev Kund, Rajuka, Amreli**



**Vadgam Vav, Banaskantha**



**Dabhela Vav, Amirgadh, Banaskantha**



**Hadad Stepwell, Banaskantha**



**Roho Vav, Banaskantha**



**Gola Stepwell**



**Danta Vav, Banaskantha**





**Kumbhariya Stepwell, Banaskantha**



**Ambaji Vav, Ambaji, Banaskantha**



**Nana Jampur Vav, Banaskantha**



**Zazpor, Kadia Dungar ancient rock-cut Kund-Vav, Bharuch**



**Mandava Na Kuon, Mandva, Bharuch**



**Muktampur Vav, Bharuch**



**State of Unity Vav, Gadkoi, Narmada**



In the villages of Bharuch, Shihor, Tilakvada and Vyas, Narmada *mata* or goddess Narmada is depicted in the temples as riding a crocodile. In the Kutch region of Gujarat, there is a temple dedicated to Ashapuri (Asara) on the oceanfront



## Important Stepwells of India

### Chand Baori



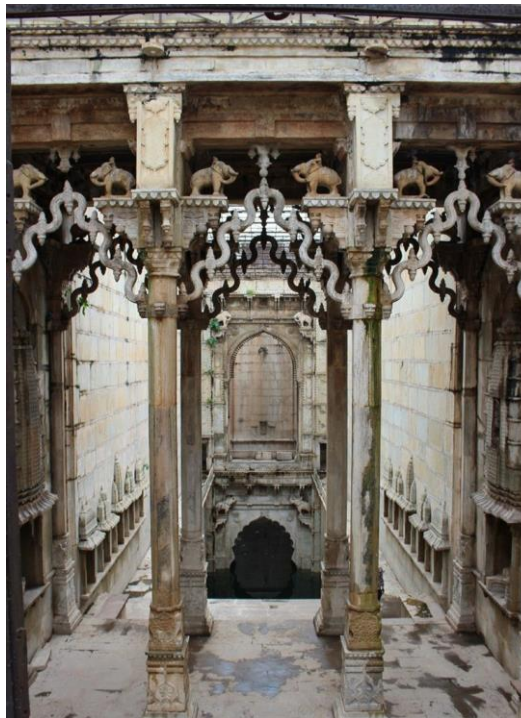
Chand Baori stepwell is one of the most overlooked landmarks in the country, consists of 3,500 narrow steps over 13 storeys making it one of the deepest and largest stepwells in India. It is one of the oldest and most attractive landmarks in Rajasthan and also the most visually spectacular step well in India.

### **Rani Ki Ji Baori**

Raniji ki Baori is one of the noted stepwell situated in Bundi town in Rajasthan. The multistoreyed structure with places of worship on each floor is a 46 m deep stepped well with some superb carvings on its pillars and a high arched gate.

Raniji ki Baori is a three storey stepwell and has two fantastic well-arched gates with great artwork done on the pillars and statues of Elephants made up of white marble (not too white) on the top of all columns. The last (3rd) gate of the stepwell is a beautiful one as it has the sculptures of elephants on all corner and it's a delight to watch.

The entrance of the baori is on the 2nd floor, as the local authority has closed the entry from the 1st (or ground floor). Might be to stop pigeons entering the stepwell as they have made of mess of almost every stepwell of India. At Chand Baori in Abhaneri, the rooms were stinking of pigeon shit. At Bundi, they (local authority) have completely covered the baori with an iron sheet, (more like a transparent one) which is a smart move to keep the site clean.





### Agrasen Ki Baoli



The protected monument by the Archeological Survey of India, Agrasen Ki Baoli is a 60-meter long and 15-meter wide historical step well on Hailey Road near Connaught Place in New Delhi. Agrasen Ki Baoli is among a few of its kind in Delhi, consisting of 103 steps made of red stone. It is also one of the most haunted place in India.

### **Rajon Ki Baoli**

Rajon Ki Baoli is a famous stepwell in India, located in Mehrauli Archaeological Park with 100 historically significant monuments. Gandhak ki Baoli and Rajon Ki Baoli are two stepwells located in Mehrauli Delhi.

### **Hampi Stepped Well**

The Pushkarni Tank Hampi is an example of Chalukya architecture, the one in Hampi is a very beautiful built in the 15 century, Vijayanagara Dynasty.





### **Lakkundi Stepwell**

Lakkundi is a village on the way to Hampi and known for the Chalukya style temples, stepped wells and historic inscriptions. There are numerous ancient wells in Lakkundi but Chateer Bavi, Kanne Bavi and Musukina Bavi are popular for their carvings architectural beauty and Manikesvara Temple stepped well is one of the Tourist attractions of Lakkundi.

### **Imambara Stepwell**

Bara Imambara complex in Lucknow is among the grandest buildings of Lucknow. The Imambara complex also includes the large Asfi mosque, the bhulbhulayah and bowli, a step well with running water.

### Modhera Stepwell



The Sun Temple complex of Modhera, situated on the bank of the river Pushpavati, Modhera temple is under the supervision of Archaeological Survey of India. Surya Kund of Modhera is a large rectangular stepped water tank known as a finest example of geometry.

### **Baramotichi Vahir**

Palace Made Inside The Well, Secret Ways Are Made Up of Stones



An ancient 110 feet deep well. The diameter of this well is 50 foot. This building was built in between 1641 to 1646 by Shrimant Virubhai Bhosale. Special thing about this well is the palace that is built above and inside the well. Many of the palace's secret way connect Palace from wells, which are made from stone. 12 canals or streams originate from this well that provides water to the garden beside it. The name of this well has been originated from the names of these 12 streams.



The well is, located near limb village in Satara district. The well is octagonal. It appears like Shivling. It is said that the water of this well never dried. Many ancient wooden doors are still there in the Palace built on well.





Craftsmanship during the period of Shivaji

There are 4 pillars in the palace built inside the well. These pillars have craftsmanship during the period of Shivaji. Many walls of this palace are carved with the Lion. The craft of Lord Ganesh, Hanuman also exists here.







Throne is made of Stone

Inside this palace, a throne is there that is made of stones. It is said that the king sits here and meet the people. The structure of this palace is so well designed that it remains cool in summer and warm in cold days.





Delivered a talk on Stepwells of Vadodara

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# Step wells of Vadodara

**17th March'17 (Friday)**  
**6:30 pm to 7:30 pm**

**Speaker:**  
**Ms. Kakoli Sen**

**Venue: BMA, Anmol Plaza, 2nd Floor, Old Padra Road, Vadodara-15.**  
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Art Workshop for Shaishav School Students in Vidyadhar Vav “ Heritage in your Neighbourhood”









Lectures on the Stepwells

## Conclusion

Even today, stepwells are often referred to as "women's spaces". In many of the stepwells, today shrines have sprung up or in other cases the stepwells have been converted into temples. All these shrines and temples are invariably dedicated to some incarnation of the Mother Goddess, referred to as "Maata" in Gujarati. A few of these Goddesses are at the heart of a cult exclusive to women. In villages and the countryside, this cult continues to flourish even today.

These local goddesses are worshiped and their blessings invoked by women for protection, health and well-being.

By the early 21st century, only a handful of stepwells had remained in relatively decent condition, particularly those where tourists were likely to visit. For most structures, however, the prevailing condition was deplorable for a host of reasons. For one, the stepwells that had been deemed unhygienic havens for parasites and disease by the British rulers of India consequently were barricaded, filled in, or otherwise destroyed. Also, modern substitutes, such as village taps, plumbing, and water tanks, eliminated the physical need for stepwells, if not the social and spiritual aspects. As obsolescence set in, stepwells were ignored by their communities, often becoming garbage dumps and latrines, or were repurposed as storage areas, mined for their stone, or just left to decay. Depletion of groundwater from unregulated pumping caused many of the wells to dry up, and, when water was present, it generally was fouled by garbage or was overgrown with vegetation from lack of attention, even when temple wells were still being actively used. Stagnant water was the least of it. Anyone with phobias involving fear of snakes, bats, bugs, heights, depths, darkness, or filth would find many stepwells challenging. The unusual 16th-century Bhamaria retreat well near Mehmadabad (Mahemdavad) housed a colony of extremely vocal bats. The extraordinary 13th-century Vikia Vav on a former caravan route near Ghumli was on the verge of total collapse. Stairs were unstable and treacherous.

We're conditioned to look up at architecture, not down into it, that's why stepwells are overlooked many a times.

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.

The British administration viewed the stepwells with horror and disdain. They regarded the waters in these wells as unclean, unhygienic and a source of potentially hazardous infections. Regulations imposed by the British prohibited the use of the stepwells for drinking water. Many were sealed and declared off-limits while others crumbled to the ground, victims of neglect and disuse.

Today, we find rubbish floating in the waters of the stepwell. It has been 70 years since our Independence and instead of reviving an age-old water conservation method, and also repairing and maintaining existing water bodies, borewells, dams, canals and interlinking projects are being heavily invested in.

All these are projects that have long-term environmental impact that are detrimental to nature and something as precious as a natural resource like water.

Purnima Bhatt quotes the Gujarati poet, Dayaram Dalpatram who in 1986 had said:

Resettle the abandoned villages.

Seek out the stepwells, wells, rivers, streams and  
revive the old traditions.

Make this your sacred dharma.

I can't agree with this more, or emphasise on the need for water conservation. I enjoyed visiting the vavs, not just because of what I saw but also because of the questions they raised. For the first time, perhaps because of the sheer numbers and varieties I saw in such a small area, I went beyond admiring the architecture and actively sought out information on stepwells in general and the ones in Vadodara in particular — books, papers, articles, etc — in an attempt to answer the many questions I had.

This search has been most satisfying; with every question answered, other questions have been raised making this journey of a seeker an ongoing one.



“Vavnagari” -City of stepwells

No stepwells exist here anymore in this City of stepwells.

We don't want this situation. We all have to take a step forward to save an entire category of architecture slipping out of history's grid.



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