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Stepwells as Cultural Texts: Decoding the Architectural Narratives of the Historical *Baories*/ Stepwells of Rajasthan

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Abstract: Every work of art, whether it is a poem, a story, a painting, a song, a sculpture, an embroidered costume or a building is shaped by the culture where it is situated in spatial and temporal terms and it also plays a formative role in the cultural life of the society where it comes into existence. Hence many unspoken tales about the life and culture of the human civilization are hidden in every work of art. The present paper attempts to decode the architectural language of stepwell, a unique water management system which is known as 'Baori' or 'Bawdi' in Rajasthan. There are several stepwells scattered across the sand dunes of Rajasthan, to name a few *Chand Baori*, *Raniji ki Baori*, *Hadirani ki Baori* and *Heera Panna Kund*. All these *Baories* are known for the special patterns of the staircases to access the water of the well, carvings of the deities on their walls and altars to worship deities. Situating these historical stepwells in Foucauldian 'Heterotopia', the present paper attempts to decode them as cultural texts to trace how they function as intimate, lived spaces of memory, and cultural meaning, they are not just mere symmetrical arrangements of stones and stairs. How the architectural language of the *Baories* constitutes an ethical response to environmental requirements and communal needs in the arid regions? How the very intricate and symmetrical structure of these stepwells narrate the tales of the cultural heritage of Rajasthan? Addressing these issues, the present paper underscores the need to study the *Baories* of Rajasthan not only as architectural marvels or utilitarian structures built to manage the water crisis in arid regions but as deeply resonant cultural texts embedding within their architecture the intertwined narratives of survival, gender, religion and environmental ethics.

Keywords: *Historical Stepwells, Baories, Architectural Language, Cultural Text.*

Art is an important agent then in the transmission of culture. It is one of the ways in which the roles by which men and women are expected to pattern their lives are communicated and passed from generation to generation. (Greenblatt, 228)

Since time immemorial, art and society are closely connected and are reciprocally shaped and developed. Every work of art comes to life in consonance with the spirit of the times and in consonance with the physical environment as well. No art can flourish in a cultural vacuum and no culture can thrive without the growth of art in all its forms. Hence many unspoken tales about the life and culture of the human civilization are hidden in every work of art whether it is literature or architecture. Like literature and music, architecture too is the manifestation of the cultural context where it takes shape. If one wants to dive deep into architecture as an aesthetic experience, to relish the grandeur of this work of art, one cannot overlook the formative role of socio-cultural ethos which sets the rhythmic pattern of its design, working in tune with the geographical space to arrange materials to shape its structure and furnish it with variegated shades of life. Emphasizing the shaping force of societal energy for architecture, Prof. Humayun Kabir elucidates essential requirement of social solidarity, social endeavor and social cooperation for architecture in comparison to other forms of Arts:

There may be a great lyric poet, though the society in which he flourishes may be static; there may be great painters...without the support of their immediate environment.... The artist in other mediums experiences on his own and he is comparatively free. But in architecture, as perhaps in drama, he is closely linked with society, rooted in the society. The expression of his art depends upon the state of social development, upon the environment in a way which is far more intimate than in any other form of art. (2)

Deliberating on architecture being rooted in the atmosphere and the environment, Prof. Kabir emphasizes the very process of how lived experiences of a community get translated into the buildings which are built for personal and public use. These buildings, these architectural specimens so built, speak of the life of the community that lived by them. In this

regard, these buildings work as cultural archives. Writing in the similar vein, Anuj Shrivastava states,

It is due to this that some of the most interesting stories have found their way into the relief art, sculptures and architecture of India. Behind every piece of relief art and sculpture, there is master craftsmanship but also multi-layered stories with intricacies which reveal themselves to the keen observer. (114)

Every architectural piece from Egyptian Pyramids to Great Wall of China, from Taj Mahal to the temples of Khajuraho goes beyond the symmetry of bricks and stone, they appear as the carriers of the cultural DNA, preserving the identity of the community who built them. In this grand pageant of such historical buildings, the stepwells, a unique water management system which is known as '*Baori*', '*Baoli*' or '*Bawdi*' in Rajasthan, '*Vav*' in Gujrat also has their significance with "the curious property of being in relation with the other sites' (Foucault 23). Any endeavor to locate these architectural spaces beyond their being a site for water management in terms of their physical properties and to identify them as carriers of cultural DNA of a particular social community is an enterprise to 'look at the set of relations by which a given site can be defined' or to unravel this space as 'heterogenous space'. Situating these historical stepwells in Foucauldian 'Heterotopia,' the present paper attempts to explore these specimens of architectural engineering as cultural texts to trace how these *Baories* function as intimate, lived spaces of memory, and cultural meaning.

In fact, the stepwells in India are remarkable architectural structures that reflect the ingenuity and cultural richness of ancient water management systems, especially in arid regions. Among many of these spectacular specimens, the *Rani ki Vav* at Patan in Gujarat stands out as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, celebrated for its intricate carvings and historical significance. Like Gujarat, there are several majestic stepwells scattered across the sand dunes of Rajasthan, to name a few *Chand Baori*, *Raniji ki Baori*, *Hadirani ki Baori* and *Heera Panna Kund*, *Neemarana Baori*. The present paper attempts to read the script of architectural patterns of these stepwells in terms of perceptions, thoughts, beliefs and social behavior of the people who lived by these life-saving structures in sand dunes. Discussing at length the very nature of our lived spaces, Michel Foucault asserts: "we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and

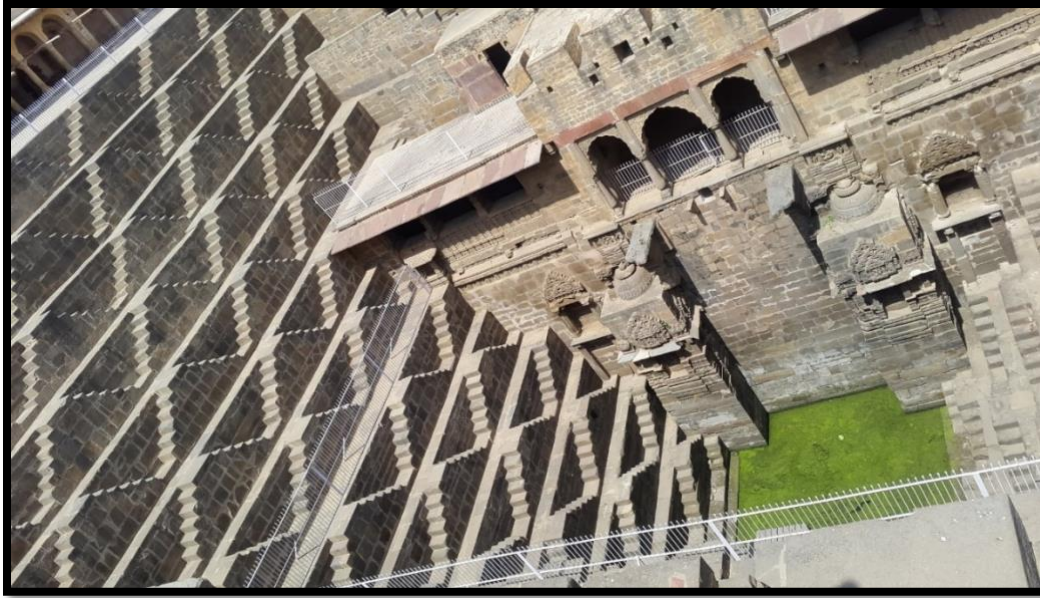
things...we live inside set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another” (23).

Foucault elaborates that there are some real places which exist in every cultural setting, every civilization and which are formed in the very founding of society. These are the places in which “all the other real sites that can be found within the culture are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted. Places of this kind are outside of all places, even though it may be possible to indicate their location in reality” (Foucault, 24). The historical stepwells of Rajasthan can be categorized as the spaces which Foucault called Heterotopias. My observations of these heterotopias of time are based on the selected stepwells of Rajasthan namely *Chand Baori* at Abhaneri in Dausa, *Raniji ki Baori* in Bundi, *Hadirani ki Baori* at Todaraisingh Nagar in Tonk, *Heera Panna Kund* at Amer in Jaipur and *Toorji ka Jhalra* in Jodhpur.

The resourceful water harvesting structures with their mesmerizing intricate patterns of the flights of stairs capture the attention of architects, environmentalists, geographers, art historians, cultural critics across the world. I would like to mention Chicago-based journalist Victoria Lautman who spent years in India personally visiting over 200 stepwells, photographing and jotting down the narratives of these miraculous spectacles of craftsmanship and engineering in her book *Vanishing Stepwells of India* (2017). In this book, Lautman has given a detailed account of some of the stepwells in Rajasthan which include the majestic structure of *Chand Baori* in *Abhaneri*, *Panna Meena ka Kund*, *Amer*, and two of the small subterranean edifices in Jodhpur, *Sainath ki Baoli* and *Mahila Baag Jhalra*. To add further, *Stepwells of Rajasthan* (2016) is also a rich collection of photographs and anecdotal records about a large number of stepwells. This book was penned by V.N. Bahadur, a retired IAS officer with deep interest in the study of Stepwells who co-authored a monograph on the stepwells of Rajasthan with Department of Tourism. There are some insightful research articles which add to the knowledge of the architectural structure and the water harvesting techniques followed in these stepwells to recognize them as hydro-geo sites to promote hydro-geo tourism in India.

Moving near or sometimes passing through some of these “gates to the underworld” as Victoria Lautman calls them in her book, *The vanishing stepwells of India*, I realized that each one of these architectural marvels have many hidden tales to tell because there are ‘other’ spaces within this one architectural space. There are worlds within a world; space for water storage, space for religious rituals,

space for social interactions, space for recreation, space for performing arts, space for women. All the *Baories* are known for the special patterns of the staircases to access the water of the well, carvings of the deities on their walls and altars to worship deities or temples along with space for relaxation and recreation. I entered this storied world of stepwells through magical mazy flights of the stairs of *Chand Baori*, one of the oldest and largest stepwells located at Abhaneri in Dausa district. This stepwell was constructed as rain water harvesting structure by king Chand of Nikumbha dynasty in the 9th century AD. This architectural marvel is an enclosed rectangular courtyard-like structure which is globally known for its precise geometrical design with 3,500 identical, slender steps with triangular arrangement in a funnel like form. These steps are so arranged on three sides of the stepwell at the thirteen levels of the structure that the interplay of light and shadow across the steps adds to the magnetic appeal of its captivating structure which narrows down towards a pool of water at the bottom. Along one side of the pool, there are two elevated sculpted structures with the figures of Hindu deities which seem to be gazing solemnly over water as if protecting the pond. Reading this site as a cultural text, the pond and its surrounding elevated deities tell a narrative of sacred protection, and religious rituals; moreover, this configuration presents an architectural rationale where the deities are spatially elevated and visually prominent while the water below is working as a transitional medium between human beings and deities. This site talks about the deep connections between spiritual symbolism with the spatial and social fabric of the daily life of the people who lived by these structures. In the fourth side of the stepwell, there is a three-story pavilion with intricately carved *jharokhas*, galleries, and balconies designed for the royal family's seating and some raised platforms which seem to be built for performing arts. Next to *Chand Baori* is the Harshat Mata Temple, a 9th-10th century temple dedicated to Harshat Mata, regarded as the goddess of joy and happiness. Apart from fulfilling religious functions, the temple was also meant as a community space. According to Anuj Shrivastava, "This is evident from the board games engraved on the floor which were most likely used by the people to entertain themselves" (115). And so, *Chand Baori* exemplifies how ecological requirement was blended with religious practice, social interactions and promotion of performing arts.



Spectacular view of Historical Stepwell: Chand *Baori* at Abhaneri

These historical stepwells were functional not only as sources of water but also as significant cultural spaces, especially for women. To quote S. Dhvani, “Stepwells are primarily a source of water, and since gendered segregation of work has ensured collecting water, washing clothes, bathing children etc. is women’s work, ... these spaces were more pluralistic, and accommodated women from different religions, creating opportunities for strong bonds and solidarity among women from different backgrounds.” These architectural structures provided opportunities for social interaction, spiritual practice, and communal gathering, allowing women a degree of visibility and mobility that was otherwise limited within patriarchal norms. Any discussion about the stepwells as gendered spaces is incomplete if we are not referring to *Rani ki Baori* in Bundi. This stepwell was constructed in 1699 by Rani Nathavati, the younger queen of Maharao Raja Anirudh Singh of Bundi. Commissioned by a queen, this stepwell stands as a testament to the influential role royal women played in shaping public infrastructure and community life in medieval Rajasthan. This three-storey structure with intricately carved pillars and a high-arched gateway with statues of elephants on the top of the columns reflects the contemporary aesthetic sensibilities and the cultural reverence for water as both a life-sustaining and purifying element. Each level of the *Baori* houses dedicated spaces of worship, indicating that water collection was intertwined with ritual practice, thus elevating the utilitarian activity of water harvesting into a sacred experience. The presence of lifelike stone elephants at the corners,

traditional symbols of royal glory, strength and protection highlight the sacredness of the space. The stepwell fulfilling the physical requirement of the arid region and providing space for worship, artistic expression and social interaction appears as a living narrative of the cultural values and practices of its time. The stepwell not only signifies female patronage but also serves as a spatial domain primarily used and shaped by women. Its enclosed, shaded structure with a narrow entrance offered privacy and security, creating a semi-public realm where women could gather, perform rituals, and engage in communal life outside the domestic sphere. Symbolically, the stepwell's descent into the earth resonates with feminine metaphors of fertility, water as life-giver, and the sacred womb, reinforcing its identity as a space aligned with Shakti, the divine feminine. Thus, *Rani Ki Baori* stands as both a utilitarian and cultural artifact, where gender, spirituality, and power intersects through architecture. Like *Rani ki Baori*, there are some other stepwells which were commissioned by the Queens. Ramarasade, the queen of Maharana Raj Singh of Mewar constructed *Trimukhi* (tri-faced) *Baori* in Udaipur. *Naulakha Baori* near Dungarpur was built by Preimal Devi, the queen of Maharawal Askaran.

Adding to the tradition of construction of the stepwells by the women or construction of these majestic structures to commemorate the legendary women, there is one such stepwell, *Hadi Rani ki Baori* in Tonk which appeared as a majestic setting in Bollywood movie *Paheli* (2005). This stepwell reminds Hadi Rani, brave daughter of a Hada Rajput who was married to Ratan Singh Chundawat of Salumbar in Mewar, the commander-in-chief of the army. The folklore narrates that her husband Rao Ratan Singh was called to battlefield shortly after the marriage as Aurangzeb attacked the region. Wavering between his duty as a warrior and his love for his newly wed wife, Rao Ratan Singh was reluctant to go. To inspire him for his duty towards his motherland, Hadi Rani cut off her own head and sent it to him as a token of courage and loyalty. *Hadi Rani ki Baori* is a tribute to the memory of Hadi Rani, a legendary symbol of honour, sacrifice, and devotion in Rajasthan. This stepwell has flight of stairs on three sides which is similar in design to *Chand Baori* but the structure of this stepwell with double-storey corridors on each side and arched gateway is not so complex and resplendent like *Chand Baori* or *Rani ki Baori*. On all the three sides, steps are arranged in sets of thirteen each at higher level and five each at lower level, going up to the water level. Around the water tank, there are images of Brahma, Ganesa and Mahishasuramardini which are enshrined in niches.

These are some stepwells like, *Toorji Ka Jhalra* in Jodhpur *Loharoo ki Baori* and *Khemcho ki Bawri* in Swai Madhopur and *Banjaro ki Baori* at Govindgarh which were named after a particular community who lived in the vicinity. These water structures were built for the locals as well as the travelers to get water, to use for social gatherings and to seek respite from the scorching desert heat. *Toorji Ka Jhalra* which is believed to have been built in 1740 during the reign of Maharaja Abhay Singh of Marwar is named after ‘*Toorji*’, a community that once resided in the neighborhood and the word ‘*Jhalra*’ is used for a stepwell in Rajasthan. Its construction for a particular community indicates that stepwells were not merely utilitarian structures but also served as places for social gatherings. Similar to other stepwells, *Toorji Ka Jhalra* also serves as a rich cultural text with its walls decorated with intricate carvings depicting deities and mythical creatures which add to the religious ambience of the well. This historical vital water source and social space has nowadays become a site for visual story-telling with its alluring play of light and shadow on the symmetrically built flights of stairs which fascinates the photographers. It is rightly stated, “Stepwells like *Toorji Ka Jhalra* were not merely utilitarian structures but also served as social and cultural exchange centers” (Ministry of Tourism, Government of India). *Panna Meena ka Kund* at Amer in Jaipur which is named after the architect who designed this architectural marvel is also known for its interlocking pattern of steps that descend in a visually mesmerizing, almost maze-like arrangement. The beautiful combination of structures for physical needs, religious rituals, and social interaction in their architectural design in all the stepwells scattered across Rajasthan, makes each of these water reservoirs a powerful cultural text that tells the tale of how the inhabitant of this land of sand dunes integrated resource management with ritual, aesthetics, and communal life. V.N. Bahadur observes that each stepwell “generates a solid earthliness blended and encapsulated in the divine, but purely human in function, purpose, element and atmosphere, all directed for a good holy living, like good devotional music generating values of conservation and protecting gifts of nature” (13).

All stepwells from the majestic *Chand Baori* to medium sized *Toorji ka Jhalra* can be read as the Heterotopias, as sites of religious rituals, recreational activities, and everyday social interaction were equally integral to the cultural life of the people who lived by them. These were the spaces where stories were exchanged, rituals were performed, and cultural memory was reinforced. The presence of shrines, inscriptions, and symbolic motifs within these stepwells

reflects their role as sacred spaces, seamlessly integrating practical needs with religious and aesthetic values. Reading these structures as cultural texts allows us to move beyond their magical geometrical structures and unravel these vital repositories of the lived experiences of the communities who built and used them. Meanwhile, this exploratory journey through these architectural marvels inspires us to explore, revive and restore these treasures, these “huge architectural gems built deep into the earth like inverted fortresses” (Azmi). The vital presence of these stepwells on the architectural landscape of Rajasthan substantiates Gaston Bachelard’s insightful assertion that “Inhabited space transcends geometrical space” (47). Indeed, these deeply ‘inhabited’ spaces are not merely architectural acts responding to environmental requirements, but cultural forms that encode religious belief, social order, and collective identity. There is a great need to explore more meticulously these ‘Heterotopias’ of compensation to revive, restore and retell the stories associated with these stepwells to add life to our ‘save water’, ‘save cultural heritage’ campaigns in a world where we are living “in the epoch of simultaneity, we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side -by-side, of dispersed” (Foucault, 22).

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