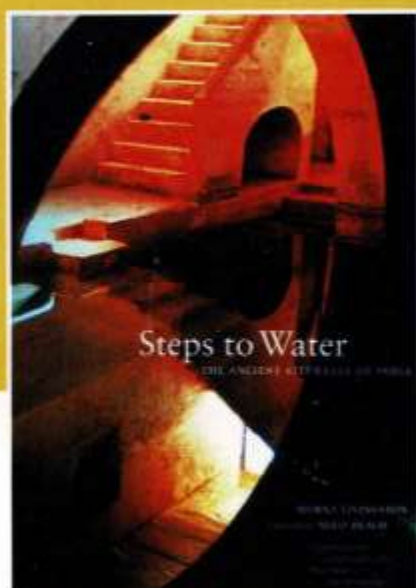




# STEPS TO WATER

THE ANCIENT STEPWELLS OF INDIA

Author **Morna Livingston**

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Review by **Sachin Jain**

in the arid regions of western India, nothing is more sacred than water - indeed, it defines the lives, myths and rituals of its people

This book by Morna Livingston traces the fascinating history of stepwells, from the Hindu origin, to their second flowering during Muslim rule, and eventual decline under British occupation. It also reflects on their current use, preservation and place in Indian communities.

The author looks at the evolution of stepwells and stepped ponds from the 5th to the 19th century and explains how these formed an integral part of the western Indian communities as sites for drinking, washing, and bathing, as well as for colorful festivals and sacred rituals. Livingston has structured her study from the perspective of a cultural historian rather than a mere architectural documentation, which helps the reader in understanding the sociocultural milieu, art, architecture and engineering of the times. Excellent architectural illustrations supporting the photographs help in comprehending the scale and feel of the structures in a better way.

A chronological scale with landmark dates / periods in history, comparatively tabulated against the dates of these water structures, right from the first *ghats* in northern India in 100 BC and the first rock-cut stepwells in 200-400 BC, to the last stepwell in Wankaner in 1923, puts the pieces together into a clear picture. It enables the reader to not only understand

the chronological evolution but also the parallel activity of a similar nature happening in the region and elsewhere.

Apart from her own first hand research based on interviews with travelers, archaeologists, architects, scholars and native people, the author has very extensively researched the existing text on the subject and related to diverse topics from art, architecture, history, Hindu ritual and *shastras*, and textile. Archaeological Survey reports from the late 1880s to around 1910 have been acknowledged as the "most relevant primary source" of information accompanied with rare photographs and measured drawings. Travelogues of Louis Rousselet, who traveled to India in 1860s have been cited as important sources of the information on cultural and landscape milieu of Gujarat at the time. Livingston states that "for twelve hundred years stepwells and stepped ponds have been integral to life in western India." Apart from being water-harvesting structures, "these underground buildings, usually from three to nine stories deep, became community centers; as passages into the subterranean, they were invested with religious meaning."

As the author describes, "...the earlier, rectangular stepped pond and the closely related linear stepwell are designed to

make groundwater available to those on foot... continuous steps from ground level to the bottom of the structure lead to water, no matter how great the variation in the water table... as the water table drops slowly after the monsoon, a longer descent is necessary, but the water surface always laps against a step and can always be reached."

In the first chapter, Livingston looks at the early Indian water structures and tells how the first use of stone blocks made the new form possible. It then looks at the architectural brilliance and superior construction that distinguish the Hindu stepwell. She dwells upon the various examples of stepwells from locations spread across Gujarat and Rajasthan and touches upon the tremendous medieval economy that once centered on the Indian Ocean and the trade routes. It explains how the form of the stepwell, and its deep vertical shape presents only a parapet to the direct sun, while its pavilions shade the stone and water below as also its visitors from sun and hot winds. The colors of different stones used at different places "offer a refreshing respite after the bleached landscape."

The second chapter covers the religious aspect, deities and rituals associated with the stepped wells.

In the chapter "High Hindu Stepwells", the role and the conflict of brahmin architects and Sompara engineers, who built these structures and their divide, which was accentuated by the dictates of the caste system, is described. The process of inception and construction of a Hindu stepwell, often beside a healthy *bhilipatra* tree, whose roots love water, has been described. The articulation of constraints presented by technology into architectural features like the presence of dirt bulwarks left in the well during construction were later replaced into pavilions at Patan. Such insights make the narrative rich and interesting. Other variations like the "*saptmukhi*" (seven-mouthed) stepwell have also been discussed. This was a period when there were a series of commissions for water buildings and temples, "as if the sole inspiration was the desire to preserve intact the Hindu religion." The author opines that "the construction of wells around Anilvarda Patan was thus a specific, if delayed, response to the destruction of Somnath temple. The contribution of wealthy Jains under Solanki rule, in this flurry of building, adding actively to their temple sites at Mount Abu and

Ranakpur, added further to such lavish spending on architecture in the region of eastern Gujarat and southern Rajasthan." Stepped well building activity, with gems like the stepped pond at Modhera, thrived during the Solanki rule.

The fourth chapter elaborates on how India's medieval kingdoms and its Sanskrit tradition were largely dissolved by the 14th and early 15th centuries. In response to Islam's distaste for the human figure, the form of the ornament metamorphosed from symbols intelligible to both Hindus and Muslims. Motifs like leafs, flowers and tree of life gained precedence over human figures and deities. During the Muslim period, Hindu construction methods and architecture were modified, and stepwell ornament changed to reflect Islam's social moves and aesthetic sensibilities. The stepwell and the stepped pond so transformed, evolved into the most elegant and graceful example of architecture ever built in western India. The coming of the Mughals into northern India impacted the very existence of the stepped wells as Gujarat suffered social unrest and a loss of power. In Rajasthan, Mughals' innovative use of water buildings as plea-

sure quarters - enlivened with textiles, flowers, lights and perfume spread to the stepped ponds by 16th century. The stepwells of Shekhawati in the 1800s produced stunning painted walls.

British disdain for traditional wells and stepwells is aptly summarized by Livingston in an extract of a letter by Edwin Lutyens in which he wrote to his wife that the water Hindus bathed in was "unspeakable" and "the natives... have no idea of appliances, of economy or any sort of cleanliness - apart from their own bodies which they seem forever washing but with water, and water from sources so obvious that it bleaches me to watch it." This attitude finally sounded the demise of the tradition and was abandoned in favor of modern tanks, water towers and eventually pumps and taps. People also moved away gradually from the attitude of water "conservation" to water "exploitation" by drilling and depleting the water table.

In the last chapter, Morna concludes with a discussion of India's attitude towards water, stepwells, and their preservation since Independence. She opines, perhaps rightly, that "...owing to a combination of social and structural factors, water buildings - while never the most prominent structures in their time - may be the most numerous buildings of the medieval period to survive. In this they provide a welcome measuring line for architecture..."

'Steps To Water - The Ancient Stepwells of India' is a well researched and well-illustrated documentation and cultural history of the water structures in the Indian tradition. The architectural measured drawings are sourced from Archaeological Survey Reports and the photographs are taken by the author over a 15-year period. The book is definitely a collector's item for your bookshelf.

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